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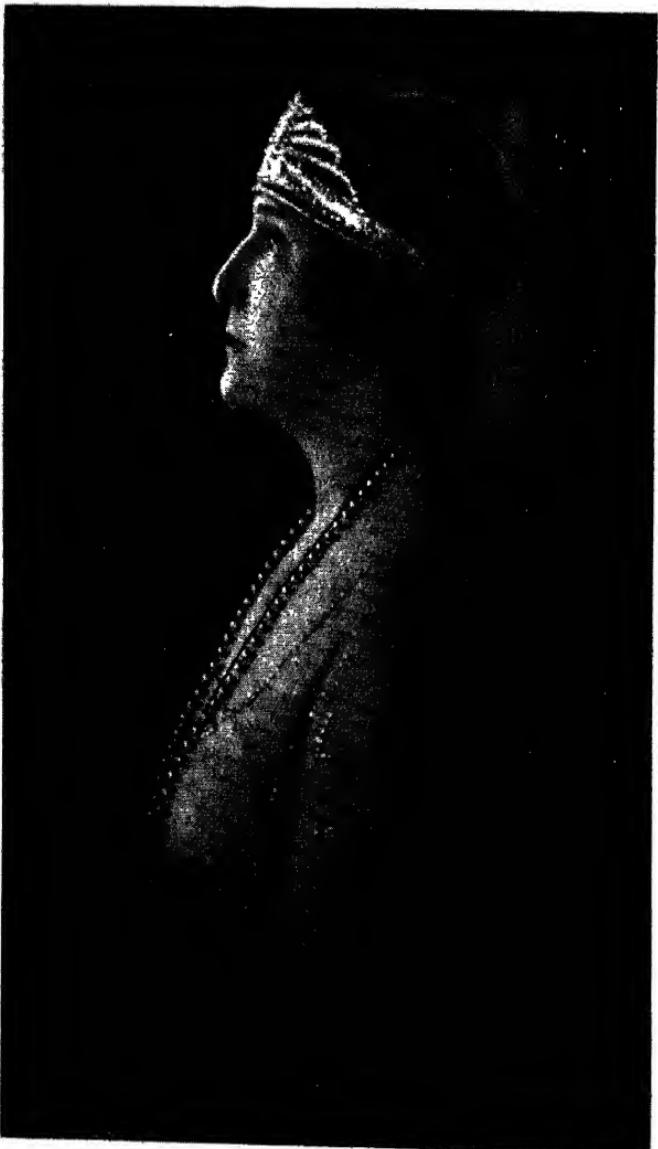
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MELBA



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Melba

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MELBA

# MELBA

## AN UNCONVENTIONAL BIOGRAPHY

BY  
**PERCY COLSON**

Les dieux sont de nos jours les  
maîtres souverains ;  
Mais, Seigneur, notre gloire est  
dans nos propres mains.

—RACINE

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A TRIBUTE TO THE GREAT COUNTRY  
WHICH GAVE BIRTH TO MELBA  
AND ESPECIALLY  
TO THE CITIZENS OF THE CITY  
FROM WHICH SHE TOOK HER NAME



## PREFACE

THE life of a famous singer offers perhaps, less scope to the biographer for the accomplishment of his fell purpose than that of any other brand of celebrity; especially in the case of one who has but recently died. If he tells "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," he is apt to give offence. If he suppresses any of it, he will be roughly handled by those of the singer's friends who require truth, not only in the "inward parts," but shouted upon the housetops. And the critics will chide him for his sins of omission. If, on the other hand, he confines himself to a tedious record of artistic triumphs, newspaper criticisms, and letters, and to presenting a wholly flattering portrait of his subject, no one will read his book.

It is infinitely easier to write about people who have been dead for a hundred years or so. There are none still living who care a tinker's curse what you say about them, and the very period in which they lived lends them a certain interest. Then, too, the writer can and invariably does call the resources of fiction to his aid.

Great singers are, generally speaking, not particularly interesting people. They are, as a rule, entirely concentrated on themselves and their voices, and the careful lives which they are obliged to lead in order to preserve those voices, combined with the strenuous work which their career entails, leaves them but little time for anything else.

Melba, however, appears to me to offer an exception

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tion to the general rule. To begin with, she had a distinct personality. Then, too, she lived through, and saw the end of an epoch; the brilliant and prosperous period which ended on August 4, 1914. And she was a leading artistic personality during that epoch. Again, she was the last of what one may perhaps call the legendary *prima donnas*, for the days of the worship of great artistes—or for any kind of hero-worship—are, I think, definitely past. They have lost their mystery; it has been taken away from them by the gramophone, the wireless, and the too efficient modern Press Agent. The curiosity which induces a crowd of shop-girls and errand-boys to stare at a film star is a very different feeling from that which fills the Albert Hall with an hysterical audience come to worship a Patti or a Kreisler. Opera, at the present time, is in the melting-pot. Music-lovers are tiring of the old gods, and so far no new ones worthy of their homage have dawned on the horizon. So I hope that some account of Melba's musical career, the *milieu* in which she moved, and of opera and opera singers in general will not be entirely without interest.

I must acknowledge my obligation to two books now out of print: *Melba—a Biography* by Agnes Murphy (1909), and Melba's own *Melodies and Memories* (1922); also to *Chapters of Opera* by H. E. Krehbiel; *Musical Reminiscences* by Lord Mount-Edgcumbe (1747); *Covent Garden and the Royal Opera* by Richard Northcutt; and I have quoted some anecdotes from my own reminiscences, *I Hope They Won't Mind*. My thanks are due to Lady Juliet Duff, Madame Blanche Marchesi, Madame Zélie de Lussan, Lord Richard Nevill, Colonel Eustace Blois, Mr. Percy Pitt, Mr. Percy Eales, Mr. Thomas Cochran, Mr. Hugo Wortham, and Mr. Beverley Nichols, for valuable help.

I have tried to avoid saying anything that could

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possibly give offence to anybody, but if I have inadvertently done so, I herewith apologize.

And I beg the reader to excuse me if—seduced by some passing thought suggested by the context—I have occasionally left Madame Melba in the lurch, or used her as a peg on which to hang myself; “it is my nature to ! ”.

P.C.

LONDON, S.W.,

1931.



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## PROLOGUE

WHAT magic there lies in a name! Even as the scent of lavender or stock in the basket of a passing flower-seller can cause the hot and dusty city street to vanish for a moment, while we are borne on the wings of fancy to some sweet old-fashioned garden where we played as children, so the chance mention of a name has power to loose a chain of memories so vivid, that the present seems but a dream, and only the past lives. For all of us who have reached middle age, there are names of places, or of persons, haunted by some "leaf-fringed legend": names with which we associate all that has been pleasantest in our lives; with the days when we were "at play —in the sun." To me there is no name which can conjure up those happy memories so potently as that of Melba.

A Melba night at the opera some thirty years ago! It recalls not only that thrillingly lovely voice, and the personality and magnetism which caused Melba to reign over Covent Garden with all the power and prestige of such queens of song as Catalini, Jenny Lind, and Patti, but also a social epoch which, though we knew it not at the time, was fast drawing to its close, and which was stricken to death in that fatal August of 1914.

It was a brilliant epoch; perhaps the most brilliant and luxurious that England has ever known, and however futile are the lamentations of its survivors, one cannot wonder at them, for in these

impoverished and democratic days, the position of the once privileged classes has changed more than that of any other class of the community.

In the time of good King Edward of pious memory, the aristocracy still held its own. Taxation was comparatively low; the great town and country houses were still occupied by their hereditary owners who entertained lavishly in them, and the wealthy Jews and *nouveaux riches*, to whom the social tolerance of King Edward had opened many doors previously fast locked and bolted, poured out money in their endeavour to attract the right people to their houses and break down the last barriers. In all social periods and in all civilized countries, a “big night” at the opera has indicated the height of the social barometer, and nowhere more so than in London between, let us say, 1880 and 1914.

Memory lends a strange glamour to those Melba nights. How pleasant it was on a soft June evening, to drive to the opera in a smart hansom! To “hear the harness jingle,” and to watch the trees in the Green Park gilded by the setting sun. One drove at a leisurely pace through dignified streets in which the old Georgian buildings had not yet given place to great blocks of hideous flats. The window-boxes in the private houses and clubs were gay with pink geraniums and marguerites, and in nearly every cab and carriage one passed, were other pleasure-seekers. Then one joined the endless queue in Long Acre, and so to the rich splendour of Covent Garden theatre; women blazing with jewels and wearing tiaras; men all in full evening dress, and those who were going on to some diplomatic party, wearing orders. The opera lived up to its title of “Royal,” for the King and Queen attended it constantly, and the Royal box and the omnibus box were always occupied. Perhaps the opera was *La Bohème* with Melba as Mimi and Caruso as Rodolfo, and who can

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forget the thrill of those two wonderful voices in the duet of the third act?

After the opera one walked into Bow Street through a double lane of footmen, many in state liveries, and on to supper at the Savoy. It had not then been invaded by the *hoi-polloi*, and supping there was like being at a private party. Very likely Melba herself would come in late with a party of friends, and that delightful Hungarian orchestra—so much more soothing to eat to than jazz—would begin to play the haunting music of Mimi's death scene which we had just been hearing. "Mimi" had indeed, sung for her supper, and as singing is hungry work, it may well have been on this occasion the nightingale who felt that, "Now more than ever seems it rich to die"!

To have created legend in the history of opera, and to have reigned as undisputed Queen of Song over such a society and such an opera-house, is no light feat to have accomplished. Let us follow in Melba's footsteps for a while as she ascends the broad and pleasant way that led her to her throne.



## CHAPTER ONE

### BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

THE task of the biographer is considerably simplified if his victim has been obliging enough to have been born under unusual circumstances. Take, for instance, Wilde's hero, Mr. Worthing, whose earliest memories were of the inside of a carpet bag, and who was able to point with pride to the first-class waiting-room of Victoria Station—Brighton Line—as his "home town." Again, we have Moses, so opportunely discovered by Pharaoh's philanthropic daughter, and Cæsar, whose entrance into this "troubelous world" caused almost as much stir as did his exit from it. Then, too, the birth of our first female parent would have given rise to a good deal of gossip had Adam been blessed with neighbours.

But there are many celebrities who, while unable to boast of beginnings quite so remarkable, have yet made their first public appearance under conditions sufficiently interesting. Adelina Patti only just missed what would have been for her a most appropriate birthplace, the green room of the Opera House at Madrid, where her mother was singing at the time. Marie Hall, when a child, played her violin in the streets of Newcastle, and Handel, by mounting to an attic at midnight in his nightshirt, to practise the harpsichord, has provided a charming illustration for the numerous books which have been written about him.

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The birth of our heroine was as normal as it could possibly have been. It took place in 1859 at Down-side, Richmond, a suburb of Melbourne, where her earliest years were spent and where she attended her first school. A few years later her family went to live in a country township about forty-five miles from Melbourne, at a house with the unromantic name of Steel's Flats.

Probably there is nothing in the world more dreary than these small Australian towns and settlements, or the suburbs of a big city. D. H. Lawrence, in his *Kangaroo*, has described one of them to us. The wooden houses or shacks, with their irritating, would-be facetious names, "Torestin," "Wye Work," and the like; the chapels with their corrugated iron roofs, the litter of broken bottles, tin cans, and household débris, the lack of privacy, and the general atmosphere of discomfort and impermanence. The impermanence of places where everything is in the making and everybody is in a hurry to get rich; where the miner of to-day may be the millionaire of next week, and where land is to be had almost for the asking. And even harder for a European to endure; the all-pervading democracy.

In 1859 there were no well-built roads, no network of railways, no big modern hotels, and even the large cities were in their infancy. Melbourne was still comparatively small, and responsible rule on a democratic basis had been established only four years previously; in 1855. Queensland became a separate colony in the year of Melba's birth. Australia may well claim to be the happy country that has had no history other than that of peaceful progress towards its present position.

But even now, man is only an incident in Australia. The things that are permanent in that vast, barren, lonely land, are the burning sun, the cruel, thirsty Bush, infested with venomous black snakes, the

burnt-up fields, the song of the crickets in the quivering heat, and the mysterious blue mountains in the background. This wild, desolate country with its absence of tradition and its hardy inhabitants, breeds a unique type, a type entirely free from the diffidence and the self-questioning characteristics of the older civilizations. Australians, however long they may have been away from their native land, seem always to retain some suggestion of the wide open spaces, the independence, and the "I care for nobody, no, not I" attitude of their country. Melba never lost it, even when she was the spoilt darling of the most highly civilized society in the world.

I came across a curious example of that attitude last year. I met at dinner an Australian lady who had married an Englishman, very correct, and of excellent family. Some of us had been to the Chelsea Arts Ball, or some such event which had recently taken place, and we were talking about it. "I was there, too," said the Australian, "but I nearly missed it. Dick (her husband) and I had been dining at Quaglino's together. I asked him to take me but he refused, as those things bore him to death, so off I went alone, to his great disgust. When I got there I found I had only a little over two pounds on me, and the tickets were three guineas. I wandered all round the hall trying to find a door where I could sneak in, and at last found one open. I went up a little staircase and found myself in a gallery overlooking the organ loft. A couple of workmen were standing there, looking down on the dancers. One of them said to me: 'Do you want to go down, Miss?' 'Yes,' said I, 'but I haven't a ticket and I don't see how.' There was a long pole standing in a corner of the organ loft which reached to the place we were standing. He pointed to it, saying: 'Just you slide down that there pole, Miss—me an' my mate will 'old it firm.' I had my fur cloak on, and was holding

my bag, so I said: 'I'd do it like a shot, but what shall I do with these damned things?' 'That's all right, Miss. We'll chuck 'em down after you.' So down I slid, and they threw them to me like the decent chaps they were.

"I then went into the corridor, and, as luck would have it, met three or four young men just coming out of a box. They looked at me curiously, seeing me with my cloak on, and said: 'Have you a box, Madame? If not, perhaps you would like to use ours? We are going on to another party.' You bet I accepted. I left my things there and went downstairs, and soon found some friends. We went back to the box, as the boys had left two or three bottles of 'bubbly' and a lot of food, so we had a high old time."

This narrative was received with incredulous joy by the younger guests, but I noticed that the older women looked rather askance at the fair Australian. Just imagine an Englishwoman taking such a risk!

In the 'sixties, life in Australia was still very rough and ready. Nellie Mitchell, as she then was, drove from Melbourne to her home in a rickety old four-horse stage-coach on rough roads that were hardly more than cart-tracks, and, but for the flocks of sheep and herds of cattle being driven to market, you seemed alone in the world, once Melbourne was left behind. It took them over three hours to drive the twenty-five miles to Lilydale, where the coach stopped, and the rest of the journey, some thirteen miles, was accomplished in the family wagonette, one of those detestable vehicles in which you sit sideways on hard, narrow seats; similar wagons are still to be seen in the busy streets of Melbourne. These big new Western cities often present strange contrasts. Even in New York you have sometimes to put up with primitive conditions that are now unknown in England. For instance, you can live in one of those

plumbers' paradises, a New York apartment house, and go to your business in the New York subway! Very many of the American villages yield nothing in squalor to the worst specimens to be found in Australia.

Melba's childhood was passed in poor enough circumstances. Her father, David Mitchell, the son of a small farmer in Forfarshire, had arrived in Australia, if not with the proverbial half-crown in his pocket, at any rate with very little more. His capital amounted to exactly one sovereign. He lived for some time the adventurous life of the colonist in a new and undeveloped country. He worked in the gold-fields, did any odd job that offered itself, slept where he could find shelter, and . . . managed to save, for he was a Scot, and had the foresight, endurance, and strength of character of the Scotch peasant. Her mother was of Spanish descent. David Mitchell was one of the first to recognize the possibilities of Melbourne, and to foresee how, and in which direction it would grow. "A growing city will need bricks," he said. "Why should I not make those bricks?" So he set to work to make them, in small quantities at first, and then, as his anticipations were realized, by the million. At least half the most important buildings in Melbourne are built of his bricks. He left a fortune of over seventy thousand pounds when he died.

But at first as I have said, things were not so flourishing, and the family worked hard, did their own housework, cooked and mended, living the frugal, healthy lives of people of their class. The future *prima donna* took her full share in this family life. She was a strong, active, good-tempered child, up to anything in the way of a lark. She fished, rowed —one of the few rivers in Australia ran at the bottom of the hill on the side of which was her father's house—and went for long walks in the wild surrounding

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country. And—as always—she liked the boys, and many a time when she was at school climbed the fence and ran off to play with the boys of the Scotch Presbyterian College.

Even as a baby she was fond of music, a fondness inherited from her parents. Her father had a good bass voice, and her mother played the piano and the organ. In those early days, however, the house boasted only an old and cracked harmonium. She soon learnt to play on this instrument—with disastrous results to herself on one occasion. Her father was a strict Presbyterian, and Sunday was kept in the appalling manner in which only Scotch Presbyterians can keep it. Not a book must be read except the Bible, not a note of music heard except hymns, the only relaxation allowed being the reading of long, dull sermons. At that time it was the custom for ministers or lay readers from Melbourne to visit the outlying Bush districts and hold services in one or other of the farmsteads where there was a room large enough to accommodate the local population. Once, when this pleasing ceremony was being held at the Mitchells' house, Nellie was told to start a hymn. Bored to tears by the whole proceedings, she pulled out all the stops on the ghastly instrument and began to play “ You should see me dance the polka.” The horrified elders seized her and turned her into outer darkness, and she was long in disgrace.

No one who has not spent a Sunday with these Presbyterian fanatics can imagine what it is like. Mendelssohn, in his letters, tells us how, when on a visit in Scotland, he was inspired, while walking one Sunday, with the principal theme of his beautiful overture, *Fingal's Caves*, which Wagner considered one of the finest overtures ever written. It was only with the greatest difficulty that on returning to the house he was permitted to open the piano and try it.

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Singing was natural to Nellie from the time she was a baby. She used to hum and whistle until her exasperated mother begged her for mercy's sake to stop. An excellent exercise for the larynx, this humming, but it is rarely properly appreciated by the relations of the hummer. She made her first public appearance at the age of six at the little public hall at Richmond, Melbourne, and sang "Comin' Thro' the Rye" and a composition entitled "Shells of the Ocean," greatly to her own delight and that of her family. Her schoolfellows were unimpressed with her efforts. Never in after life did she receive such a devastating criticism as that of another child of her own age, who, when the poor little *prima donna* eagerly ran to her, hoping for a word of appreciation, looked at her coldly, saying, "Nellie Mitchell, *I saw your drawers!*"

When a little older, she was sent to the Scotch Presbyterian College in East Melbourne, where she did not distinguish herself in anything except music.

She adored her father, and by all accounts he must have been worthy of her affection. There is something curiously attractive about those quiet, reticent Scots; they are so dependable, and to say, as is so often said of them, that they have no sense of humour is nonsense. It was probably said originally by an Irishman who had tried to borrow money in Aberdeen! David Mitchell was a strict father, but infinitely kind. Nellie's first love was the organ, and she used to take lessons in Melbourne twice a week. To encourage her he promised her a gold watch when she could play twelve pieces by heart. She learnt the pieces very soon, but, alas, she dropped the watch one day when running home from school and when she discovered her loss it was too dark to find it. A month later it was found and restored to her. The careful David was very angry. "You will never get another watch from me," he

said. But she kept the broken pieces until the day of her death.

Even as a child, Nellie loyed applause and organized concerts in order to obtain it. Once she got one up at home and canvassed all her friends, begging them to attend. To her disgust when the great day arrived only two people turned up. Her father, who considered that there was very little to choose between a professional singer and the Scarlet Woman, and who viewed with anxiety her decided liking for appearing in public, had asked everybody to stay away. She went steadily through her programme "for the two's sake." Another excuse for a concert was found in the necessity for a new fence for the local cemetery. For this concert she did the bill-posting herself. It was more successful than her previous one, bringing in nearly twenty pounds. So the inhabitants of that silent city could sleep their long sleep in peace and safety.

She had hitherto led a happy, careless life, and had seen her father's prosperity constantly growing, but she was not to escape the common lot. She was only twenty-two, but "sorrow never comes too late." In 1881 her mother died, and three months after was followed to the grave by her little sister. It was the first time that she had come in contact with death, and the shock upset her terribly. A change of scene was necessary to restore her vitality and cheerfulness, so her father took her for a trip to Queensland. A strange choice. Queensland is still wild enough, so what must it have been in 1881? She had been taken there to recover her spirits, but another misfortune awaited her. Marriage! On an evil day she met a young Irishman, Charles Nesbit Armstrong, the youngest son of a poor Irish baronet. They fell in love and married. It was natural enough. Nellie Mitchell had met few people from the old country, and was fascinated by the charm and

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manners of the young man, and he, poor soul, exiled in that lonely country—he was manager of a sugar plantation at Port Mackay—lost his heart at once to the pretty, high-spirited girl with the lovely voice. Her father, too, did all he could to further the match, as he saw in Nellie's marriage the end of those disturbing longings for a musical career. He felt that he would much rather pay for babies than for music lessons, and Brisbane was not exactly a musical centre. So they married in haste at Brisbane in 1882, and repented during the leisure of a whole year.

The marriage was a failure from the first. The plantation was in the heart of the Bush, and there they went, after a short honeymoon. This is how the young bride subsequently described her existence. “We had a little house with a galvanized iron roof, desolate and lonely, with no other company than that of the birds, and especially, of the reptiles. Soon after we arrived it began to rain, and rain in Queensland is rain indeed. It rained for six weeks. My piano was mildewed, my clothes were damp, the furniture fell to pieces, spiders, ticks, and other obnoxious creatures penetrated into the house—to say nothing of snakes, which had a habit of appearing underneath one's bed at the most inopportune moments. It rained and rained, a perpetual tattoo on the roof; and as the days passed by, and the weeks, I felt I should go mad unless I escaped. My only recreation was to sit on the verandah and watch the luxurious tropical vegetation burdened with water, yet so hot that one could actually see the leaves unfold.”

It reads like Somerset Maugham's haunting and sinister little story, *Rain*. Sometimes she would try to bathe, but as she walked to the river she would see the great snakes hanging from the branches, and in the water, leeches would fasten themselves to her

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white limbs and suck her young blood, until she almost screamed with terror. And there were rumours of crocodiles upstream. No; Queensland was decidedly overrated! So, too, was marriage, for they very soon found that they hadn't an idea in common. She stood it until her little boy, George, was born. Two months afterwards she left her husband for good, and returned to her father's house in Melbourne.

And now Nellie Armstrong made up her mind that she would be a professional singer, and her father more or less resigned himself to the inevitable, for inevitable it was. She had all her life been studying music in some form or other; her voice was developing into a thing of rare beauty, and she had the inward certainty that she was born to sing. She had already had singing lessons of a Signor Cecchi, an old Italian teacher who had settled in Melbourne, so to him she went and confided her ambitions. He said that he was perfectly willing to train her for the concert platform and trust to her to repay him when she was making money. Her father had absolutely refused to help her in this direction.

The first concert of any importance at which she sang took place at the Melbourne Town Hall in 1884. It was for the benefit of Herr Elasser, who in his former and more prosperous days had been a fairly well-known German conductor. She was desperately nervous; so nervous that she almost decided to plead a sore throat and stay at home. But she went—never at any time in her career was she a coward—and the evening was one long triumph. I shall not quote many newspaper criticisms, but this, the first she received, must be recorded.

"... Mrs. Armstrong, whom her friends have long known as Nellie Mitchell, and who it may here be said is both a vocalist of the first rank, a pianist

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of surpassing finish, and a painter of more than amateur excellence, but who until last Saturday night had most modestly confined her performances in all of these several capacities to private circles, and who consented to go out of her delightful domestic circle only in the cause of charity. If, therefore, her success as a vocalist had been but moderate, she would have merited the warmest recognition for placing her services at the disposal of the Elasser Fund Committee, but when it is said that she sings like one picked out of ten thousand, the obligations due to her are obviously all the greater. The Elasser Concert, therefore, if it were to be remembered in no other way, would never be forgotten on account of the delightful surprise afforded by Mrs. Armstrong's singing, and everybody who heard her, will desire to hear her again, and everybody who did not hear her is at this moment consumed with regrets at not having been present."—*Australasian*.

This concert confirmed in Nellie Armstrong the conviction that she had the makings of a successful singer. As she said, "The Melbourne audience may not be the most cultured of audiences, but people the world over are much the same," and she felt very rightly that the qualities that will "get over" in one place will do so in another. She had never heard a great singer, never been to an opera, and she was much too sensible to imagine that she had nothing more to learn. On the contrary she determined to do her utmost to get properly trained, and her one ambition was to go to London. She went on singing at various concerts for about a year, continuing her lessons with Signor Cecchi. For a time even, she was soloist in the choir of the Roman Catholic Church in Melbourne—a great shock for her father, this!—and then Dame Fortune, with whom all her life she was so prime a favourite, took a hand in the game.

One morning her father came down to breakfast in high spirits, and told her he had been appointed Commissioner to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in London. "And I am going to take you, too, lassie. We sail in six weeks." It was the thrill of her life.

But some weeks before sailing she had a shock. The altruistic Signor Cecchi, who had definitely agreed to wait for payment for his lessons until she was in a position to pay him, demanded his bill, amounting to eighty guineas. Expostulations were useless : the avaricious little Italian coldly insisted on his pound of flesh, and threatened to seize her trunks if it were not paid before she sailed. How was she to get it? Her father, who was now a prosperous man, could well have paid it, but it must be remembered that he was intensely opposed to her becoming a singer, as also was the husband she had left. She had given a farewell concert, the net result of which was £67 4s. 8d., most of which she had already spent. At last, however, with the help of friends, she raised the money, put it in a purse, went to Cecchi, and threw it at him, telling him exactly what she thought of him and all his works. And she had a great command of language. Cecchi shrugged his shoulders and put the money in his pocket. But he paid for his meanness, for, as it happened, she had subsequently, under Madame Marchesi, to unlearn everything he had taught her, and she did not neglect to write home and tell all her friends about it. When she became famous he never ceased abusing her for her ingratitude, saying that she owed everything to him.

London in May! London with most of its eighteenth-century distinction unimpaired. The parks full of spring flowers; the streets full of stately carriages with coachmen and footmen in smart liveries and powdered hair. Bond Street with its fascinating

shops. St. James's, the changing of the Guard. All the joys of London in the season. What a change for the young Australian, to whom Melbourne had hitherto summed up in itself all the attractions that a big city has to offer! But she had not come to buy clothes and to be presented at Court. Her sole desire was to get a start, so within two days of their arrival at the little house in Sloane Street, which her father had taken, she set off with her precious letters of introduction. She was doubly anxious, for her father had warned her that unless the opinions of her voice were quite exceptionally favourable, he would do nothing for her. She had letters to Arthur Sullivan, then at the height of his fame, to Albert Randegger, the celebrated singing teacher, to Sir Hubert Parry, and to Wilhelm Ganz.

She was speedily disillusioned. Not one of them did anything for her. What were they thinking of, those lights of English music, that they could not recognize the wonder of the voice on which chance had given them the opportunity of passing judgment? She called first on Sullivan, who lived in a large flat in Victoria Street. He was polite, but bored. Why should he be bothered to hear a young woman who came from such an outlandish place? "Yes—er—where did you sing? Oh! Australia, of course." It is doubtful if he even knew where to look for it on the map. "What shall I sing?" said Nellie. "Oh—er—anything you like; one thing is as good as another." She sang *Ah! fors è lui*. When she had finished, he gave a tired sigh, and said: "That's all right, Mrs. Armstrong. If you go on studying for another year there might be some chance that we could give you a small part in *The Mikado*. This sort of thing," and he played her one of the pretty tunes which later on became the rage of London. She almost wept with chagrin. He had said nothing in praise of her voice, its *timbre*, its

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range, its beauty. All he wanted, indeed, was to get rid of her as soon as possible.

Her next visit was to Albert, I beg his shade's pardon, *Alberto Randegger*. He was dressed like an English gentleman; was very charmed to see her, and very correct. But he, also, was far too much occupied to bother his head about a mere Australian. Was not the Duchess of Grey coming for a lesson in a few minutes, to be followed by Lady Jane Black, and after that, was he not lunching with a countess? He purred over her, shrugging his shoulders with exquisite Italian grace. Perhaps if she would come back in a few months, he *might* be able to squeeze her in a few lessons, but now—"Oh! *Quite* impossible. The season, you know."

Then came the turn of Mr. Wilhelm Ganz, a practical musician if ever there was one. He was well known at that time as a conductor, and teacher of singing, the piano, harmony; anything, in fact, that anyone wanted to be taught. He also arranged the music for city dinners and for peeresses' parties. She presented herself at the big house in Harley Street, and began his egregious song, "Sing, Sweet Bird." To his credit he recognized that here was something out of the common. Before she had half finished it, he jumped up, saying, "You have a very beau-tee-ful voice. I will arrange for you a little concert in the city." The "little concert" was the after-dinner music he was arranging for the dinner of the Royal General Theatrical Fund which took place at the Freemasons' Hall. It resulted in nothing; at least nothing for Nellie.

As for the other musical gentlemen to whom she had letters, Sir Hubert Parry refused even to receive her. Perhaps it was a little presumptuous for a singer to expect the Head of a music school to descend to such an extent. An Australian, too! Had she been recommended at that time by Lady de Grey

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it might have been different. Mr. Carl Rosa, her last hope, forgot the appointment he had made for her.

So that was the net result of it all. Not one step had she made in her musical Odyssey. In later years Sullivan and Randegger fell at her feet and worshipped, and became her very good friends. Melba never bore malice. But what a chance they had missed! Randegger of counting among his pupils the greatest singer of her generation—if indeed he had been able to rise to the occasion—and Sullivan of an acquisition to the Savoy Company of a quite different category to Miss Geraldine Ulmar or Miss Lucile Hill. And Ganz? Ah! . . . Ganz! The kindest criticism she received was from Mr. Brinsmead, the piano manufacturer. He could conceive of no higher praise than to liken the *timbre* of her voice to that of the Brinsmead piano!

But she had still one more string to her bow. Before she left Melbourne the musical wife of the Austrian Consul, Madame Weidermann-Pinschot, who had an enthusiastic belief in her, had given her a letter to Madame Mathilde Marchesi in Paris, perhaps the most famous living teacher of singing with the exception of Manuel Garcia, who was then eighty-four years old. Madame Weidermann-Pinschot had herself been a singer and had taken lessons of Marchesi. Nellie went to her father and begged for a last chance. These English musicians were too busy and too self-important to bother about her. “Let me go to Marchesi,” she said, “and if she does not consider my voice worth cultivating, I promise faithfully to go back to Australia with you and try to be happy and forget my wish to be a singer.” David Mitchell relented. After all, they loved each other: the three greatest affections of her life were her father, her son, George, and later on her little granddaughter, Pamela.

What is more, he gave her a sum of money, not

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much—he was a frugal soul—and his one prayer was that she might be returned to him as quickly as possible, marked, “Not Wanted.” So she packed her belongings, not forgetting little George, and bought a second-class ticket for Paris.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MELEBA IN PARIS AND HER DÉBUT IN BRUSSELS

AND so in the autumn of 1886 we find our Nellie in Paris, with her beloved little four-year-old son, George. She was very hard up, but not in the least downhearted. Why should she be? She was young, she knew the potential value of her lovely voice, and she was blest with good looks, perfect health, and that happy resilient disposition which makes light of difficulties. She possessed, moreover, great strength of character, an enormous capacity for hard work, and ability to recognize and seize every opportunity that came her way; indeed, throughout her life, fortune never knocked at her door in vain. Had she not also her precious letter to the most famous singing teacher in Europe, Mathilde Marchesi?

Madame Marchesi at this time occupied a unique position in the musical world. She was a pupil of Manuel Garcia, who, although himself a Spaniard, carried on the great tradition of Italian *bel canto*. He was born in 1805, and died in his hundred and second year. At the time of his birth Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert, were still alive. Wagner, Verdi, Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann had not yet arrived. He saw them all die, and hailed the advent of such modernists and innovators as Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schönberg. His two sisters, Maria Malibran and Pauline Viadot, rank among the greatest singers of all time, and his pupils

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included Jenny Lind, Antoinette Sterling, and Santley.

Mathilde Marchesi, who was born at Frankfort, numbered among her pupils more singers who achieved fame than perhaps any other teacher of her period. In addition to Melba, Emma Eames, Emma Nevada, Emma Calvé, Gabrielle Strauss, and Henschel, all studied with her, not to speak of her talented daughter, Blanche, who also became a celebrated teacher. Not only was Madame Marchesi an authority in the singing world; she had a strong and attractive personality, and was a considerable personage in society, and was thus able to launch her *protégés* under the best auspices.

Melba—we will call her Melba, for she adopted this name for her first appearance in Paris, which was at a *matinée musicale* given by Madame Marchesi at her house in the rue Jouffroy—lost no time in presenting her letter of introduction. She was most kindly received, and in spite of her nervousness, sang her best. One can imagine how anxiously she awaited Marchesi's verdict, especially after her disappointment in London. She was not long left in doubt. When she had finished her first song the old lady ran excitedly to the door, and called out to her husband: “Salvatore, Salvatore, at last I have found a star.” She then went back to the young singer and inquired into her history, and her means, asking her above all, if she were serious and prepared to work hard, “For,” she said, “if you will work with me for one year and do exactly what I tell you, *je vous en ferai quelque chose d'extra-ordinaire!*” The famous teacher kept her promise, and Melba, to quote her own words, “soon became one of my most industrious, pliant, and talented pupils.”

Melba was very poor. The small sum she had saved and the money her father had given her, had to be managed very carefully to make it suffice to

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pay for her lessons, clothes for herself and her little boy, rent, and living expenses. As she herself said : " Many a time have I walked through the cold and rain to my lessons in order to avoid taking an omnibus." The Paris of the 'eighties and 'nineties, however, was not the anxious, expensive, and Americanized Paris it is to-day. You could live there very well and for very little if you knew the ropes, and Melba, with her quick intelligence and managing disposition, had a genius for finding her way about, a quality which throughout her career was invaluable to her.

Soon after she began her studies, she struck up a great friendship with the accompanist of the beginners' class, Fritzi Straschwig, and they started housekeeping together in rooms. Montmartre was then still the students' quarter, and the artistic type immortalized in Murger's *La Vie de Bohème* had not yet vanished from the streets. It was the period of the great Post-Impressionists—Manet, Renoir, Degas, and Cezanne. You could meet Rodolfo at any café of the *quartier*, and Mimis and Manons—types which indeed, are eternal—were to be seen on every side. Paris was a paradise for the young, healthy, and ambitious. It was a leisurely city; telephones were almost unknown, it was gas-lighted, and the streets were not yet jammed with motor vehicles and reeking with the odour of petrol. If in some of the older quarters there were other odours supposed to be less hygienic, who cared? For breakfast, instead of the stodgy English meal, you ate one of the delicious French rolls and a *café au lait*. Lunch very often consisted of something cold bought at the nearest *charcuterie*, a salad, and some cheese; and you dined gaily with *les copains* for two francs fifty, wine, coffee, and tip included. There were, of course, no jazz bands, but, believe it or not, *la jeunesse* danced with even more *joie de vivre* than

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it does now, for to judge by the faces I see in London ballrooms, modern dancing is a sad and serious undertaking. Certainly it seems to lack the sensuous element, but then, with the youthful modern, love-making is far less of a business than it used to be. He makes love much as the Jews were commanded to eat the Passover; hastily, and when he feels at a loose end in some interval between playing tennis, "speeding," or flying.

I wonder if the present-day "Hurry, hurry, or we shall miss the boat" atmosphere is good for study. It exercises an almost psychic effect on the young, making them impatient of anything they cannot accomplish quickly. It is, too, very difficult to concentrate on anything in London or Paris; the struggle for life is too severe. *Ars longa est*, and the muses are apt to revenge themselves on those who fail in respect towards them.

Melba, while working as few English students dream of working, threw herself with delight into the students' life. She and her friend gave tea-parties, using Swiss milk and buying cakes from some *pâtisserie*. They acted operatic scenes together in their nightdresses, and "when the curtain fell" had pillow-fights. They went eagerly to the *Opéra*, the *Opéra-Comique* and the *Gaïte Lyrique*, sitting in the gallery, and criticizing, and learning from the various famous singers they heard, and on Sundays they would share one of the one-horse *fiacres*, and go to the Bois du Boulogne. As I have said, she was extremely poor. She had only one winter dress, a repulsive garment of thick blue and white striped serge. It had seemed smart enough in Melbourne, but in Paris it was hardly *le dernier cri*. Anyhow, it was too much for Madame Marchesi. She bore it as long as she could, but the day came when she could stand it no longer. "You must never wear that dress again," she said.

Poor Melba answered: "I am very sorry, but I

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haven't another warm one, so I must wear it when it is cold."

"Why?"

"I can't afford another one."

"Nonsense. Your father is rich: go and order another dress and send him the bill."

This was, of course, out of the question, so she again appeared in it. The old lady was furious, and said she would not teach her if she came in it again. Melba burst into tears and left the room, but just as she got to the front door, Madame called after her, saying: "Nellie, Nellie, I am so sorry. Go to Worth's and buy yourself the most beautiful dress you can find. *Je vous en fais cadeau.*"

Always independent, she refused, and went on wearing the obnoxious serge!

The passion for taking baths had not yet reached France, and Marchesi could not understand why Melba should fuss about not being able to take a *grand bain* in her lodgings. She and her husband used the bath as a boot cupboard!

Madame Marchesi, delighted with Melba's rapid progress, continued to be kindness itself to her. She entertained a good deal, and as, in addition to the most famous French artistes, every foreign notability who visited Paris came armed with a letter of introduction to her, invitations to her receptions were in great request. All the ambassadors, their wives, and the *personnel* of their embassies; the *élite* of French society, high officials, and celebrated authors were to be seen at them, and—of even greater value to a budding operatic star—famous composers and impresarios on the look-out for new talent looked to Marchesi to find it for them. Among the composers who were *habitués* of Madame's *salon* were Gounod, Ambroise Thomas, Lalo, and Delibes. Melba frequently sang before this very critical, not to say *blasé* audience, and her future success was never for a

moment questioned. On one occasion she sang the Mad Scene from Thomas's *Hamlet* so beautifully that the composer was roused to the greatest enthusiasm and could not do enough for her. His friendship was valuable in more ways than one, as besides being the principal of the Paris Conservatoire, his influence in operatic circles was considerable. She made another useful friend in Baron Haussmann, who was *Préfet de la Seine* under the Emperor Napoleon the Third. He was a cousin of Madame Marchesi, and being passionately fond of music, he never failed to be present when her pupils were being shown off. Baron Haussmann, by the way, founded one of the first regular series of orchestral concerts in Paris. He chose as conductor, Monsieur Pas de Loup. These concerts are now known as the Pas de Loup Concerts. He also organized the concerts at Court, at which both Madame Marchesi and her husband frequently appeared.

One of the best known and most sympathetic personalities in Parisian society at that period was the Baron Imbert de St. Amant. He was a member of the *Corps Diplomatique*, and author of a well-known series of biographies of the lives of the French Queens. This highly-strung and temperamental music-lover had one great passion in life, operatic stars. He had worshipped Albani and Patti in their day; he helped to launch the three famous Emmas: Emma Eames, Emma Nevada, and Emma Calvé, and had also used his influence in favour of Sybil Sanderson and Gabrielle Strauss. He was known as the *Lance d'Étoiles*, and was never known to make a mistake in his estimate of a potential *prima donna*. The voice of Melba and her good looks and happy nature enchanted him, and he became one of her most enthusiastic admirers.

As the French say: “*C'était un type.*” His methods were very thorough. When he was launch-



*Mathilde Marchesi*

Paris

MADAME MARCHESI



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ing a singer, he not only worked indefatigably to establish her musical reputation; he insisted also that all his friends should receive her. He would write about her in the papers, and spend his evenings going from party to party, raving about her voice and speaking in the highest terms of her personality. Occasionally he would fall mildly in love with one of his *protégées*, but although he always exacted from her a fitting gratitude for his attentions, he was never a serious rival to any more youthful lover, as besides being of a deeply religious disposition, he suffered from a nervous complaint which rendered impossible any *crises d'amour*. So, like "The Devout Lover," he worshipped the object of his affections in "distant reverence," and let himself go only in verse!

Melba was very grateful to him for his help in making her a success in Paris, and she was, naturally enough, flattered by the appreciation of so genuine a connoisseur. Personally, however, she had little use for him. She was far too much a product of the new world to care for his *grand seigneur* manners, and she disliked his avariciousness, which was notorious. He never offered even a few flowers to the adored one of the moment. Melba was quite as sure of her future as he was, and she never at any time made herself cheap.

Madame Marchesi was not the woman to do things by halves. She was extremely generous, and when the future of a really gifted pupil was in question, she spared neither expense nor trouble. When therefore she considered that Melba was ready to be heard by *le tout Paris*, she gave a party on the most lavish scale. Electricity was, of course, not yet in general use, but it could be specially installed at great expense. The first person to have it in Paris was Madame Munkacsy, the wife of the celebrated Hungarian painter. The second was Madame Marchesi, who had it done for this occasion. A stage had been erected in the

dining-room, and parts of Hermann Bemberg's opera, *Elaine*, were performed. This was the first time that Melba sang anything of Bemberg's in public; he was afterwards to become one of her best friends and the writer of many of the songs in which she was most successful.

Thus, after about nine months' intensive training, and of hard work and goodwill on the part of both teacher and pupil, Marchesi decided that it was time for Melba to make her *début*. But where? Paris was weighed and found wanting. French methods are too hidebound and traditional. It is hardly possible for a newcomer to stand up to the established favourites, who wage a remorseless war against new talent, new operas, new anything. Besides which, only too often the road to success lies through the manager's *chambre à coucher* rather than through *le salon d'audition*. But luck—that luck which followed her all her life—was with her. One day two of the directors of the *Théâtre de la Monnaie* of Brussels arrived to hear the pupils sing. One after another performed, but Dupont and Lapissida, as they were called, were unimpressed. At length Melba sang—the Mad Scene from Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*. The two men looked at each other and said never a word, but going over to Madame Marchesi, led her into another room. After a few minutes she came back and said to Melba: "These gentlemen want to engage you for *Le Théâtre de la Monnaie*." She was enchanted, and signed, with a trembling hand, the contract giving her three thousand francs a month and providing her costumes.

It was an excellent chance. The Brussels Opera House has been the jumping-off place for many singers who have subsequently become famous, and Belgium has always been kinder to the foreign artiste than either Paris or Berlin. Then, too, Marchesi had a valuable friend there in that splendid old musician

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Gavaërt, the director of the Brussels Conservatoire. Gavaërt was, by the way, godfather to Marchesi's daughter, Blanche. So to Brussels Melba went, armed with a letter of introduction to the great man, which opened all doors to her, and made all the difference in the world as regards the attitude of the critics and the musical notabilities of the city.

She made her first appearance on October 13, 1887, as Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

That she was able to fulfil her contract was another instance of the luck of which I have spoken, for a few weeks before she signed the contract for Brussels, she had signed a provisional contract with old Strakosch, who had been Patti's impresario, coach, and general mentor, and who recognized her enormous possibilities. She was to place herself at his disposal for ten years, beginning at one thousand francs a month. Marchesi, however, said she was a great friend of Strakosch and could arrange with him to release her. But he was not so easily disposed of. On arriving at the theatre for her first rehearsal, she was presented with a legal document which stated that in view of her contract with Strakosch she could not be allowed to appear at *La Monnaie*. She and the management were in despair. Telegrams, letters, entreaties, were of no avail, and the day before the *début* arrived. Early in the morning, when Melba, after a sleepless night, was lying worried and unhappy, there came a knock at the door. It was Lapissida, who wanted to see her immediately. She threw on a wrap and hurried to the landing, calling out: "Yes, yes, what is it?" Hardly able to speak from excitement, he stammered: "*Strakosch est mort! Il est mort hier soir, dans un cirque, et je vous attends au théâtre à onze heures!*"

Her success was immediate. The critics all raved about her voice, comparing her to Patti and other famous sopranos. They were particularly enthusiastic

with regard to her already finished technique and her exquisite trill, and they passed over with indulgence her dramatic shortcomings. One paper, *La Patriote*, said: "Before two years Madame Melba will be known as *La Melba*." News of her *début* was telegraphed all over Europe, and managers and impresarios hurried to Brussels to hear her. Her second appearance—as Violetta in *La Traviata*—was attended by the Queen of Belgium, who sent for her to her box and congratulated her, saying that she had never heard so lovely a voice.

Her triumph was purely and simply a vocal one, as her *sens du théâtre*, never at any time in her career at all keen, was at that time rudimentary. She sang in Italian. She had, of course, picked up some knowledge of French in Paris, but her accent was so Anglo-Saxon, or rather Australian, that Marchesi wisely would not allow her to sing in that language. As a matter of fact, Melba never lost her accent.

Little Georgie had accompanied his mother to Brussels; he was a charming child, and Gavaërt, who loved children, became very fond of him, and often asked him to his house. On one occasion when Georgie was looking out of the window a funeral procession passed, and he asked Gavaërt why they were all dressed in black. The old gentleman, who was extraordinarily well-preserved for his age, explained that it was because someone had died, and that at last death came to everyone. The child looked at him, and with the cruel candour of his age, said: "*Tu dois mourir bientôt, toi aussi, parce que tu es bien vieux, tu sais.*"

George was rather an *enfant terrible*. Two or three years afterwards when Melba was singing in London she took a flat in Ashley Gardens. Maude Valérie White, the song-writer, had the one above, and one evening when Melba was out, Miss White's little nephew, Jack, came into the room where she was

## IN PARIS AND HER DÉBUT IN BRUSSELS

sitting. "We are playing a game," he said, "and we haven't any counters, and young Armstrong says we can have his mother's pearls instead. He says he knows where they are. What do *you* think?" She told him what she thought very firmly, and Melba's pearls were saved.

The stay in Brussels was not to pass entirely without unpleasantness. Melba's undesirable husband was still very much alive, and having, of course, heard that she was likely to become a star in the musical firmament, he came to Europe, and suddenly made his appearance in Brussels one afternoon when she was taking tea with a well-known painter, Monsieur Wauters. There was a terrible scene: the little boy was frightened out of his life, and poor Melba was at her wits' end to know what to do, as Armstrong told her he would make life impossible for her. He even threatened to make a disturbance at the opera that evening when she was singing. She was naturally afraid to appear, and very sensibly went to the directors of the opera and explained the situation to them, begging them to interfere in some way. They fortunately succeeded in persuading Armstrong to leave Brussels. It is not known how and where he lived after this until the final *dénouement*, but Melba and her child were henceforth able to live unmolested. She probably made him an allowance on the condition that he left her in peace.

During this first season Melba sang two other rôles and with equal success. Lucia in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Ophélie in Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*. This last she had studied note by note with the composer, who called her "*L'Ophélie de mes rêves.*"

While in Belgium, Melba sang at several concerts and private parties. In a letter to *The Times*, which appeared soon after her death, I read an interesting incident which occurred at the orchestral rehearsal for

her first appearance in Antwerp. Joachim, then at the height of his fame, was waiting to rehearse the Beethoven Concerto, but courteously allowed the young unknown singer to take her turn before him. He was sitting in the stalls listening, and next to him was a youthful musician aged twelve. As Melba began Micaela's *aria* from *Carmen* with that exquisite voice and perfect rhythm, Joachim whispered to the little boy, "Handel, I think." The little boy who didn't know *Carmen*, but who knew it wasn't Handel, looked puzzled. Joachim whispered again: "No, no. I was wrong; it is by Johann Sebastian Bach." The child looked at him with horror, and seeing the amused, kindly smile on the face of the great violinist, realized that he had been joking.

The orchestra was hopeless, but Joachim shrugged his shoulders, and said: "We are not in Vienna." Afterwards he played the Concerto, as no one but he could play it at that period. This rehearsal was the beginning of a very pleasant friendship between the two great artistes.

About a week afterwards, Joachim gave a luncheon at his house in Berlin to which he had invited his pupil, Kruse, and as the meal was drawing to a close, he turned to his neighbour and said: "I bet you that in less than a minute I will make Johnnie Kruse talk about Melbourne." The minute passed in conversation, and then Joachim said reflectively: "I wonder why she calls herself Melba?" Australia at once ran wild!

*Coloratura* singers are frequently reproached for their bad taste and for their lack, generally speaking, of musical culture, but how on earth are they to attain it? Think for a moment of the music composers write for them and the operas they are obliged to sing in. *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Hamlet*, *La Traviata*. Such works would kill the musical instincts of a Saint Cecilia! It is the tragedy of the *coloratura* soprano

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that since Handel no great composer has written for her voice. I shall touch on this point later.

And so we see our Melba well launched on her operatic career. She had good reason to be satisfied with her reception in Brussels, but it was, of course, only the first step. She must challenge the verdict of Covent Garden, that famous theatre which can make or break the singer. In 1880 no artiste who had not made a success there could hope for an engagement in New York, and even now, although New York makes many a reputation, that reputation receives a considerable check if it is not endorsed in London.

## CHAPTER THREE

### COVENT GARDEN

MELBA adored Covent Garden. She called it "my home," and as this book is so largely concerned with opera, perhaps a short sketch of its history will not be out of place here.

It is not surprising that Covent Garden should be the goal of every opera singer, for apart from its importance as the headquarters of opera in the most important city in the world, no theatre has a more interesting musical history. Milan has, of course, *La Scala*, but its walls have always echoed almost exclusively the voices of Italian singers. Opera in Paris until quite recently was even more insular, and the same may be said of the numerous opera-houses in Germany and Austria. Covent Garden, however, is essentially international, and has been since it came into being. At one time or other in the different theatres that have occupied the site on which it stands, all the greatest singers of the world have been heard, and some of the most famous actors and actresses. Many plays which have become classics have been produced there, and the loveliest and lightest footed *ballerinas* have danced their little hour in the glitter and dazzle of the footlights and, like moths, flittered away to the darkness whence they came.

The first Covent Garden theatre was built by John Rich, of *The Beggar's Opera* fame. He had made what for that period was a lot of money over Gay's

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rather bawdy little skit on Newgate. It had, as was said, made "Rich gay and Gay rich," and he invested his profits in the erection of this theatre, which he opened in 1732 with a revival of Congreve's brilliant comedy, *The Way of the World*. It was a more fortunate investment than is frequently the case with theatrical ventures, for his heirs sold the Royal patent, or permission to build a theatre in London or its suburbs, where "tragedies, comedies, plays, operas, musick, scenes and all other entertainments of the stage whatsoever may be shown"—for £60,000. At that time only the King could grant permission to build a theatre. Covent Garden Opera is still called "Royal Opera."

It was a small affair, this first theatre, and the principal access to it was by way of colonnades; the stage was lighted by four hoops in which were placed candles in sockets. It was near one of the colonnades that James Hackett, a clergyman, murdered Martha Ray, a leading "toast" of the coffee-houses, because she had spurned his attentions. It lasted until 1808, when it was burned down through the carelessness of a stage hand, who, one evening after the performance was over, built so large a fire in the stove that the iron pipe which reached to the roof became red hot, and a lot of theatrical properties, paper helmets, and costumes hanging near it, caught fire. Several people were burnt to death.

But London had become used to hearing opera at Covent Garden, and so only three months later the foundation-stone of the second theatre was laid by the Prince of Wales. It was inscribed: "Long live George, Prince of Wales," and in the present building it has been inserted in its original place in the vaults. It weighs three tons. This theatre was opened in the following year with *Macbeth*, and to meet the expenses of the production the prices of admission were raised. This brought about the

famous O.P.—old price—riots which lasted sixty-seven nights. It met with the same fate as its predecessors, and was burnt to the ground in 1856 at the close of a fancy-dress ball. The fire was discovered while the National Anthem was being played.

The present beautiful theatre was opened on May 15, 1858. It was considered the last word in luxury as—for the first time apparently in a London theatre—the stalls all had arm rests and were so roomy that even the fattest person could sit in comfort. It seats about two thousand people, and the stage is almost as big as the auditorium.

Opera in England has always been pre-eminently a social affair, and no other theatre has received so many Royal visitors. Handel, who was a great favourite at Court, was associated with it for many years. The newspapers of November 21, 1736, tell us that “Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales were at the theatre in Covent Garden to see the opera of *Atalanta*, wherewith they were very much pleased, *particularly at the grandness of the Fireworks!*” One wonders if this expression of Royal criticism pleased Handel as much as the “Fireworks” pleased his exalted patrons. In 1763 his *Judas Maccabæus* was given in concert form “By Command of Their Majesties.” The year 1766 was notable for an amusing strike, for the ladies of the ballet struck because they were asked to wear worsted stockings instead of silk ones.

It was at Covent Garden on May 23, 1743, that *The Messiah* was produced, a work which has held its place in the affections of the English public longer perhaps than any other musical work. Horace Walpole wrote on February 24 of that year: “Handel has got up an oratorio against the operas, and succeeds. He has hired all the goddesses from farces and the singers of *Roast Beef* from between the acts at both theatres, with a man with one note in his voice



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and a girl without ever an one ; and so they sing and make brave hallelujahs ; and the good company encore the recitative, if it happens to have any cadence like what they call a tune.”

And on March 3 : “ The oratorios thrive abundantly —for my part they give me an idea of heaven, where everybody is to sing whether they have voices or not.”

Other composers who were connected with Covent Garden in its early days were Dr. Arne, the composer of “ Rule, Britannia,” and the charming setting of Shakespeare’s lyric, “ Where the Bee Sucks.” Thomas Attwood, who wrote several operas for it, none of which have survived, is, however, remembered for the beautiful anthem he wrote for St. Paul’s Cathedral when he was organist there, “ Come, Holy Ghost,” which is in the repertory of every good choir. In 1805 John Davy composed the music for an entertainment called *Spanish Dollars, or the Priest of the Parish*. One of the numbers was “ The Bay of Biscay,” which the tenor Braham made famous.

Braham was frequently associated with the golden-voiced Catalini, who, according to Lord Mount-Edgcumbe and other writers of the day, was an amazing *coloratura* singer. Her jealousy made her very difficult to deal with. Like Patti, and also Chaliapine to-day, she insisted on being the whole show. When the manager of Covent Garden complained to her husband that the fees she demanded made it impossible to engage good artistes and so obtain a proper *ensemble*, he answered : “ What does that matter ? My wife and four or five puppets are quite sufficient for any theatre.”

Henry Bishop—the first musician to receive a knighthood—was for many years a great personage at the second of the three theatres. He had been a music publisher and composer as a youth, but success in music being slow to arrive, he went to Newmarket and endeavoured to find it as a jockey ! This profes-

sion proving too strenuous for his health, he returned to London and resumed his musical career. In a translation of one of Boieldieu's comedies which he made for Covent Garden, he introduced an original melody. This melody, now known as "I'm Ninety-five," is the regimental quick step of the Rifle Brigade. In another of his adaptations, "Home, Sweet Home" was sung for the first time, and everyone knows his "Lo! Here the Gentle Lark" (with flute accompaniment) which Melba made her own.

To music-lovers, however, his chief claim to distinction lies in the fact that he introduced Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to London—an inadequate production perhaps, but, as he said, "My sole object in so doing was to improve the national taste for opera by rendering English audiences more familiar with truly dramatic music." It was a worthy ambition, for taste at that period was at the lowest possible ebb. The public demanded a succession of songs, duets, glees, and choruses, which must be short and catchy. Any attempt at a dramatic situation was received with cat-calls, coughing, and cries of "cut it out," from the cheaper parts of the house. It was during the time that Bishop was at Covent Garden that Maria Malibran, a sister of the famous teacher, Garcia, sang there. She was a superb singer in the florid style, but, like Patti later on, her sole idols were money and applause.

Weber was for a time the musical director at Covent Garden. He produced *Oberon* there in English—and received £500 for it. I wonder how many composers now-a-days are paid so much as that for a new opera? One is glad to know that the lovely overture was an immediate success.

It was in 1847 that the first season of "Royal Italian Opera" took place. During this season *Les Huguenots* was given by command of Queen Victoria, who was present. It is amazing to read that the

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critics of the day were convinced that the music was so scientific, and its "orchestral concatenations" so ingenious and complicated, that it was above the heads of the ordinary opera-goer. What would they have thought of *The Ring*? During this season the stars were Grisi, who reigned in the affections of the public until her retirement in 1860; the tenor Mario, and our own great baritone, Charles Santley, the one English male singer who has succeeded in winning the whole-hearted approbation of that most difficult public, the audience of *La Scala*. In 1847, too, came Jenny Lind, at a salary of £4,800 for the season from April 14 to August 20, with a furnished house, and a carriage and pair free of charge for that period. The excitement was intense; such enthusiasm, an enthusiasm shared even by the Queen, who threw her bouquet at the feet of the singer, had rarely been known, and it was repeated in 1848, after which, to the great sorrow of her worshippers, she retired from the operatic stage.

With the retirement of Grisi, Patti, perhaps the youngest fully-fledged *prima donna* who has ever sung at Covent Garden, appeared on the scene, and her success was about as great as that of Jenny Lind. No singer was ever more prudent, not to say avaricious, and she had a long career of uninterrupted prosperity. Her serene old age was doubtless due in some respects to her almost complete lack of brains. She was intelligent enough, but no problems of religion, science, or politics ever interested her; she was but little moved by the joys and sorrows of humanity, and literature was to her a sealed book. But to mention only half the famous artistes, who at Covent Garden have shown us what "sweet compulsion doth in musick lie" and have incidentally been rewarded with a great deal of good English gold, would require a volume. Let us note in passing, in addition to those of whom I have already spoken, Sontag, Christine

Nillson, Albani, Trebelli, Calvé, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Plançon, Caruso and—Melba!

The number of famous composers who have come to London in order to supervise the production of their works there is legion. Among them was Verdi, who came for his deservedly ill-fated *I Masnadieri*, and, talking of Verdi, it is curious to note that when his *Rigoletto* was produced in 1853, the critics were almost unanimous in abusing it. They said it was bloodthirsty, dull, and poor in melody, and that it would certainly soon disappear from the *répertoire*. Ten years later, the ever-popular and—to me—still delightful *Faust* was given under Gounod's supervision, and in 1920, Puccini came over for his three one-act operas, of which one at least, *Gianni Schicchi*, is a little masterpiece.

Wagner's *Ring* was not heard at Covent Garden until 1872, when it was given under Gustav Mahler. Oddly enough, they started with *Siegfried*, owing to the desire of a new tenor, Max Alvary, to make his *début* as Siegfried! The *Fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Tristan und Isolde* had, of course, been in the *répertoire* for a long time.

Covent Garden is an extraordinarily dignified and beautiful theatre. Its architecture, its well-arranged boxes, its sloping floor which enables one to see as well from the last row of the stalls as from the first, its red upholstery, so becoming to people in evening dress, its fine staircase and foyer, all give it an air of distinction possessed by few other opera-houses. I have never ceased to feel a thrill of pleasure when walking up the short flight of stairs into the stalls. Then, too, its acoustics are marvellous. Caruso once told me that he could almost whisper a phrase and be heard all over it.

It makes a splendid setting for the numerous gala performances that have been given in it. How many

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foreign potentates have been entertained there, and what a magnificent spectacle is such a function! The women blazing with jewels and wearing tiaras, the men in Court dress, or parade uniform, and covered with decorations, the flowers, the perfumes, and the Royalties, and on every side, beautiful women and famous men. Gala performances have been given in honour of the Shah of Persia, the ex-Emperor of Germany, the marriage of the Duke and Duchess of York—now our King and Queen—for the Diamond Jubilee, the visits of President Loubet, and President Fallières, the ex-King and Queen of Spain, the King and Queen of Denmark, the coronation of the King and Queen, and also to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Melba's first appearance in the theatre. It is said that the Shah was exceedingly bored by the whole ceremony, and that the only part of it that appealed to him was the tuning up of the orchestra!

Will the old theatre ever again witness spectacles so brilliant and inspiring? I doubt it. The captains and the kings are fast departing, like ships that pass in the night. Democracy has, no doubt, many virtues, but stirring pageantry is not to be counted among them.

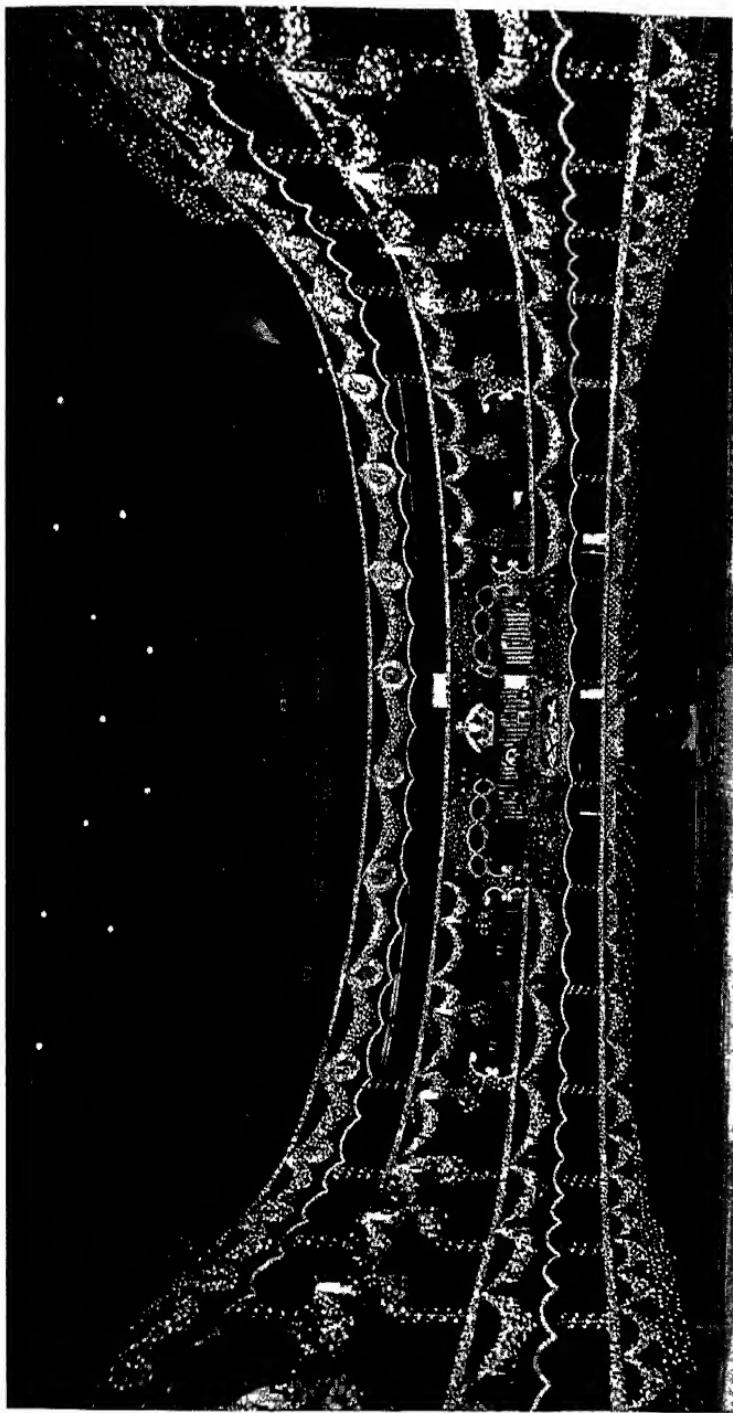
It is an expensive business, running an opera season. It always has been; people who grumble at opera prices have but little idea *how* expensive it is. And yet, though musical highbrows are constantly telling us that opera is dying, it is just as constantly cheating their hopes and proving anew its vitality. Rich men ready to spend their money on it have never been wanting, and no matter what price is charged for admission, Covent Garden is always crowded for a cycle of the *Ring*, or a great Italian singer. It is said that the first season of Italian opera in 1847 cost Edward Delafield, the wealthy amateur who financed it, nearly £35,000. Nothing

daunted, he tried his luck again in 1849, and this time he lost £25,000, and subsequently made his own *début* —in the Bankruptcy Court! In our own times Sir Thomas Beecham has been equally unfortunate. With a large list of subscribers and very careful management, it is possible to get out fairly even. I believe that the Courtauld family managed to do so during the three years 1925-6-7 in which they were financing it; and in one year during the Melba and Caruso *furore*, when Lord and Lady de Grey, Harry Higgins, and Neil Forsyth were at the head of affairs, wonderful to relate a small dividend was paid! It costs now some £1,100 to ring up the curtain for a performance at ordinary prices, and if quite full, about £1,400 is paid for admission.

Covent Garden is not without its superstitions, always prevalent in theatres. Among them is the green ink with which the Covent Garden posters are partly printed. They were originally so printed to distinguish them from those of His Majesty's Theatre which were printed in red ink. When Sir Augustus Harris took over the management he changed the name of the enterprise from "Royal Italian" to "Royal Opera," recognizing that it was no longer exclusively Italian, but nothing would induce him to change the make-up of the posters, and green ink is used to this day.

My friend, Percy Eales, who has been associated with the opera for so many years, and who has always endeared himself to everyone with whom he has come in contact, tells me that they keep three black cats, but not, as the artistes imagine, for luck! So voracious are the rats which come in from the market, that were it not for grimalkin, the glory of the upholstery, like that of so many of the ex-kings of Europe, would soon be a thing "of shreds and patches."

Covent Garden, during the years I have



COVENT GARDEN OPERA HOUSE. DECORATIONS FOR THE GALA PERFORMANCE  
ATTENDED BY THE KING AND QUEEN OF DENMARK ON JUNE 11TH, 1907



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frequented it, has always been extremely fortunate in its directors. Poor Neil Forsyth, who was accidentally drowned while fishing in Scotland, was the most charming of men; so was Major Loudoun Greenlees, and so are Colonel Eustace Blois, and Mr. Edgar. Opera stars are not easy to handle; you must have perfect tact and an unruffled temper to manage them. Colonel Blois, however, tells me that they are less difficult than they used to be. Unpunctuality and Bohemianism are out of fashion, and most of them now-a-days are keen business people, anxious to make all the money they can, and keep it.

There is an amusing story of a *prima donna* (German) who had an extremely jealous disposition. The opera in which she was singing needed two leading ladies, and she was infuriated at being given a dressing-room which she considered was less well furnished than that of her rival. On the evening of the performance she arrived early, and was caught changing the furniture of the two rooms, and with her own fair hands carrying a particularly heavy sofa into *her* apartment!

The Italians are sometimes rather temperamental. Two seasons ago, a famous tenor wept and tore his hair because he was not allowed to come forward during the performance and take applause whenever he considered it to be his due. They do these things in Italy, but then Italian audiences are quite capable of hissing a singer off the stage if he has lost his voice, or sings out of tune. I once saw this done in Siena.

Such, then, is the theatre to which Melba, fresh from her promising *début* in Brussels, came, hopeful and confident, and on which she subsequently stamped her personality more strongly perhaps, than any *prima donna* who has ever sung there.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MELBA IN LONDON—1888-1900

FOR some years previous to 1888, opera had languished in London, due mainly—as Mr. Northcutt tells us—"to the errors of the elderly Mapleson, the more juvenile Lago, and other ambitious speculators, until in that year, Augustus Harris, then thirty-six years old, appeared with the idea of giving grand opera a decent burial or resuscitating it." Melba had been warmly recommended to him by Madame Marchesi; he had himself been to Brussels to hear her and had been very much impressed with her voice, so he made no difficulty in offering her a contract for his first season at Covent Garden.

Harris was one of the most interesting personalities of his day, and certainly one of the greatest impresarios in the history of opera. When one thinks of the enormous expense entailed in running opera; the difficulty of getting together a really first-rate company of singers—and when you have got them, of keeping them in order—not to mention the risk of the undertaking, it is surprising that anyone can be found to take on the job. Harris, however, was a born impresario. He loved music, and knew just enough about it to prevent him from making too many mistakes. He was a good business man, courageous and optimistic, and his long and successful management of Drury Lane Theatre, combined with his association with the Carl Rosa Opera Company—a

very different enterprise in the days of its founder from what it subsequently became—had taught him to be able to gauge pretty well what the public wanted. Then, too, he spoke French and German well and had a smattering of Italian.

It was a dignified and fascinating London, this London of the late 'eighties and early 'nineties. Let us glance at the *Daily Telegraph* of May 24, 1888, the day on which Melba made her London *début*, and see what is happening.

We read in the theatre list that Beerbohm Tree is playing at the Haymarket in *Pompadour*. J. L. Toole is giving *The Red Flag* at his own theatre, and Edward Terry has a great success, *Sweet Lavender*, at his. Marie Tempest—is it ungallant of me to hint at age in connection with that ageless lady?—is the chief attraction at the Prince of Wales, in *Dorothy*; William Terriss at the Adelphi presents that stirring melodrama *The Bells of Haslemere*; Ellen Terry is to be seen at the Lyceum (sole lessee, Mr. Henry Irving) in *The Amber Heart*; Mr. and Mrs. Kendal at the St. James's in *The Ironmaster*; while *The Pirates of Penzance* is drawing crowds to the Savoy. Other entertainments are the Italian Exhibition at Earl's Court; "Niagara," the largest picture in the world, with original and realistic effects, and lighted by electric light, which, it appears, is attracting four thousand visitors a day; and Mr. Corney Grain at the German Reed entertainment, is giving a sketch called *Moosoo in London*.

Concerts are as numerous as they are now-a-days, and of at least as good quality. Sarasate is giving a series of four at the St. James's Hall; Christine Nilsson is also to be heard there, and Sir Charles Hallé announces some concerts of chamber music, assisted by Mr. Santley. The Richter Concerts are giving much the same sort of programme that one hears at a B.B.C. concert to-day, and the smaller fry, Lawrence Kellie,

Isidore de Lara, Clifford Harison, and so on, are hard at it. So many, indeed, are the concerts advertised, that the musical critic of the paper comments on the impossibility of even half of them being able to draw paying audiences, so things have changed very little. The front page of the *Daily Telegraph* of that period was devoted almost entirely to the advertisements of the musical profession, a great feature being a long list of popular ballads and their singers.

The popularity of the "ballad" was always very great in England, and it reached its height towards the close of the last century. I do not think it deserves all the contempt that has been heaped upon it. At its worst, it is better than the "arty" song of minor composers of the present day. Many of the ballads of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are sincere, melodious, and musically interesting, and quite equal to anything of the same nature produced on the Continent at the same period. Dr. Arne, Dibdin, Balfe, and Henry Bishop were all masters of the ballad form. This form was favoured by Sullivan, who wrote only one really successful example, the lovely "Orpheus with his Lute." Another first-rate, though more hackneyed example is Frederick Clay's "I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby," and there is, of course, the extensive and beautiful Scottish ballad literature. It is the "shop" or "royalty" ballad that has brought this type of song into such disrepute. The innumerable concerts given throughout England, at which the programme consisted of songs and part-songs, helped out by a pianist or a violinist to give variety, produced many song-writers who knew exactly what the public wanted, and they and their publishers flourished exceedingly.

The kind of song in fashion changes constantly. When I was very young, "waltz" songs, such as Sullivan's "Sweethearts," and the songs of Stephen Adams and Cowen, were all the rage. Everyone

sang or whistled “The Star of Bethlehem,” “Nancy Lee,” or “The Midshipmite,” who, I believe, saved the life of his wicked captain, who had objected to his saying his prayers on deck. People wanted songs that told a story, the more sentimental the better: as George Grossmith wrote in his amusing parody: “The Polka and the Choir-boy”:

“ We want a song, a song with sentiment  
To make the public cry,  
The accompaniment not too difficult,  
The voice part not too high.”

The choir-boy song was immensely popular. He was, of course, an orphan, and in the first verse his sweet voice was heard singing above the rest in the old cathedral; he was taken ill in the second verse and died at sunset in the third, to the accompaniment of triplets and *arpeggios 8va* (organ *ad lib.*). At that period the death-rate among ballad children was appallingly high. Songs that pointed a moral were great favourites. Who has not cursed “Oh, dry those Tears!”, “The Promise of Life,” and the horrible semi-religious song, such as “Beloved, it is Morn”? Concert audiences in the 'eighties and 'nineties wallowed in sickly sentimentality of that kind. Later on came the vogue of the short song about “Stars” or “Flowers,” and then the garden song, “In my garden there are roses, in my garden there is you,” screamed on a high note. It is a great pity that so many singers, some with great natural gifts, should lend themselves to popularizing such trash, for the sake of publishers' fees. Among the enormous output of ballads some, of course, possessed merit, notably those of Maude Valérie White and that charming and neglected composer, Goring Thomas. The ballad seems to be rapidly dying; a leading publisher told me recently that its sale is dwindling to vanishing point.

It is rare now-a-days for a ballad to achieve the ultimate success of being sung or whistled in the street. I cannot recall an instance since the war-time "Keep the Home Fires Burning," a blend of hymn-tune and domestic sentiment that appealed enormously to the masses. There is, unfortunately, no purely national popular music in England, such as the German "folk-songs," the Italian "stentorelli," or the mournful dirge-like chant of the Arab.

The third notice of the Royal Academy makes melancholy reading. Where are all the pictures then acclaimed as masterpieces, and what price would they now fetch were they to be put up at Christies'? Millais was the bright particular star—Agnew's announce a special exhibition of an engraving of his great Academy picture, "Murlay Moss"—while the other exhibitors included W. Leader, Seymour Lucas, Dudley Hardy, Herkomer, and Poynter. If we turn to the trade advertisements, we sigh to learn that ordinary coal then cost from thirteen to seventeen shillings a ton only, and the best "Derby Brights" twenty-three shillings; that a commodious sitting-room and bedroom, with lights and full attendance in Bury Street, St. James's, could be had for two guineas a week, and that Scotch whisky of guaranteed age and excellence was four shillings a bottle!

Among the politicians we find mention of Bradlaugh, Morley, W. H. Smith, and Campbell-Bannerman, and we learn that the unctuous Mr. Gladstone was greatly cheered by the Liberal victory at Southampton as it was in the cause of humanity. Mr. W. G. Grace on the previous day made sixty-four against Kent, and Her Majesty Queen Victoria left London and proceeded to Balmoral, presumably to brighten the season and encourage trade in that cheerful locality.

This *Daily Telegraph* has a certain dignity which it now lacks, excellent journal though it still is.

There are no big headlines, and there is nothing sensational about it. One feature is unaltered: the eternal record of the newly-born and the dead: that silent, terrifying record which we glance at every day unheedingly, is there.

We are beginning to cease sneering at Victorian England, and to recognize that it very definitely had its points. London was by no means the dull town that the young people of to-day imagine it to have been. Certainly the artistic and literary world was interesting enough. Its leaders were Oscar Wilde, Whistler, Pater, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Alma Tadema, Leighton, and Aubrey Beardsley. Swinburne and Tennyson were still living, and Sullivan was writing his delightful operas. If some of the artists I have mentioned have not achieved immortality, who among those of to-day are likely to earn it? At any rate many of them were men of brilliant personality, and as life was easier and people had more money to spend, the upper circles of Bohemia were very agreeable to frequent. "Show Sunday," just before Easter, when all the Royal Academicians issued invitations to see their Academy pictures, was a great function, and one simply *had* to be seen at the different studios. What lovely houses some of the artists lived in! They were most round Melbury Road, Holland Park, and St. John's Wood.

In those days women wore bustles and men took their hats into the drawing-rooms when calling; a survival of the old tradition that they were there only by favour and must be ready to leave at once. Women neither smoked nor swore, at least in public, and men were not allowed to smoke after dinner until they went upstairs, and, of course, never *in* the drawing-room. Talking of this custom, there is an oft-told but very amusing story of Oscar Wilde. He was staying at a country house, and on the evening of his arrival he was so amusing at dinner that the hostess said to the other

women: "Do let's have our coffee with the men." Nobody dared to smoke, and Oscar, who always said that the best dinner was only a prelude to the coffee, liqueurs, and cigarettes, suffered acutely. Those were the days of lamps, and presently the hostess exclaimed: "Oh, Mr. Wilde, the lamp near you is smoking. Would you mind turning it down?" "Happy lamp!" said Oscar. After that everybody smoked!

It is difficult in these go-as-you-please days to realize the formality of the 'eighties. Everyone walked in the Row in the mornings, the men in frock-coats and silk hats, and in the afternoons women drove in the park in smart carriages and pairs, the coachmen and footmen with powdered hair. One was asked to dinner a month ahead, a trying custom if one does not want to go; it is so much easier now-a-days, when asked at the last moment, to invent a lie at the telephone. Now-a-days people write very few letters. I sometimes wonder if some of the younger generation *can* write. Probably in a few more years reminiscences will be entitled "The Life and Telephone Calls of Lord Grimjaw," or something to that effect. Morals at that time were all they should be, at any rate on the surface. Ladies who had divorced their husbands were looked at rather askance, and if their husbands had divorced them, they ceased to exist. It was a wonderful period for the ladies of the chorus, who, if they were good-looking enough, all had their protectors. They have fallen on rather evil days now, poor things, as young men can pick up their little amusements at the cabarets and night-clubs, among girls of their own class.

To this London came Melba, and made her *début* in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. She was twenty-nine years old, eleven years older than was Patti at the time of her London *début*. Augustus Harris started this, his first season at Covent Garden, with *Lucrezia Borgia* of Donizetti, an opera which I imagine is now completely

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forgotten. I, at any rate, have never heard it either in London or anywhere else. The *répertoire* consisted of:

<i>Fra Diavolo</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Auber
<i>Carmen</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Bizet
<i>Mefistofele</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Boito
<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Donizetti
<i>Lucrezia Borgia</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Donizetti
<i>Faust</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Gounod
(Given ten times)						
<i>L'Africaine</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Meyerbeer
<i>Les Huguenots</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Meyerbeer
<i>Don Giovanni</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Mozart
<i>Il Flauto Magico</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Mozart
<i>Le Nozze de Figaro</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Mozart
<i>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Rossini
<i>Guglielmo Tell</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Rossini
<i>Aida</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Ballo in Maschera</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Rigoletto</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>La Traviata</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Il Trovatore</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Lohengrin</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Wagner
(Given six times)						

Among the artistes were Mesdames Trebelli, Albani, Nordica, Minnie Hauk, Margaret Macintyre, Zélie de Lussan, and Melba, and Messrs. Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Ravelli, Jean Lassalle, and Cotogni, with Randegger and Mancinelli as conductors.

It was a strong company, especially as regards the women. Trebelli, Nordica, and Albani, all at the height of their powers, were great favourites, and a newcomer must be very extraordinary in order to make a sensation, so Melba, for some reason or other, did not have the success she had had in Brussels, where, of course, she had not to compete with such a formidable array of stars. Then, too, the conditions under which she was living were not calculated to raise her spirits. Brussels had brought her more

glory than money, and she had to be very economical. The future Queen of Covent Garden was in lodgings in a dismal street in Bloomsbury! Harris was very kind to her, but he could not let her make her *début* as Gilda in *Rigoletto*, as Madame Albani had the right to that rôle. There had been no preliminary puffing in the press; merely a brief announcement that Madame Melba, a young Australian singer, who had had a considerable success in Brussels, would make her first appearance at Covent Garden in *Lucia*.

The great day arrived, and proved to be perhaps the most depressing experience of her career. She had had one short rehearsal with the orchestra, it was an off night, and the house was only half full, and some of the leading critics did not even bother to turn up. It was not until she had sung the Mad Scene that the audience began to take any particular interest in her; then indeed, there was genuine applause; even a little enthusiasm from the gallery, but that was all. The papers on the following day completed her disillusionment. Most of them spoke very little about her voice, but, wonderful to relate, praised her acting *chose inexplicable*, for Melba never could act! This is what the *Daily Telegraph* critic wrote, after alluding to her training with Marchesi and her success in Brussels:

" That Madame Melba will in the end be successful there seems little room to doubt, though the impression produced by her *début* was not an overpowering one. Her voice is of the light soprano kind, pure in tone and of good quality. Occasionally the artiste forces it, when it assumes that somewhat indefinite quality which the French call *voix blanche*. But this is a fault that greater experience will remedy. Altogether Madame Melba proved to be a talented, well-trained artiste, who for all one can tell may be endowed with dramatic as well as vocal ability. Of

the latter she gave abundant proof in the first act, and again, in the Mad Scene. The former would be almost out of place in a character so conventional and uninteresting as is the operatic version of Scott's heroine."

The other papers spoke in much the same strain, *The Standard* saying: "Her capacity as an actress is quite sufficient to render all possible justice to the character," and the *Pall Mall Gazette* praising her accomplished acting. At her second appearance, when Harris persuaded Albani to let her sing in *Rigoletto*, the house was again apathetic and half empty, and so also at the third.

She was, of course, intensely disappointed, and refusing Harris's offer of the rôle of the page in *Ballo in Maschera*, she packed up and went back to Brussels, vowing never to return to London.

And she would probably have kept her vow had not fate, in the person of Lady de Grey, intervened. I hope I shall not too greatly shock the sensibilities of any of our junior musical critics of democratic tendencies if I venture to say that I have frequently met men and women of society with a keen critical knowledge of opera. And why not? A man who loves music, and has a certain knowledge of it, and whose means have enabled him to travel and hear everything at home and abroad, is surely quite as good a judge of opera as any young gentleman who sets up as a critic after three or four years' study at the Royal Academy or the Royal College of Music, and whose experiences of opera have been limited to occasional visits to the gallery of Covent Garden. There are those among our leading critics who have far less practical knowledge of opera than some of the people of whom I am speaking.

Few, even among the critics, knew so much about opera as did Lady de Grey, and she had at once seen

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Melba's possibilities, and decided to take her up. She wrote to Brussels, saying that they wanted a new Juilette at Covent Garden, and would Melba undertake the part next season. Melba wrote back saying that she considered she had been so badly treated on her first visit that she did not wish to repeat the experience. Lady de Grey replied: "I did not tell you in my first letter that one of those who are most anxious for your return is the Princess of Wales. She was present at your performance of *Rigoletto*, and she was deeply impressed by your singing. I know that things were badly arranged for you before, but if you come back I promise you that it will be very different. You will be under my care, and I shall see that you do not lack either friends or hospitality." This, from Lady de Grey, was, of course, enough to send any young singer to the seventh heaven of delight. She replied saying that she would be only too happy to return to London for the next season.

Her success in Brussels had opened the door of the Paris Opera to her, and in the spring of 1889 she sang Ophelia in Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*. She was offered six thousand francs a month (£240). Not bad for a young singer. Paris is of all towns the most difficult for a new artiste to make a success in. The opera audience is at the same time highly critical, rather insular, and very *blasé*. But it is at any rate intelligent, and Melba had an immediate and unqualified triumph. Newspaper criticisms do not make very interesting reading, so I will quote only the *Figaro*, whose critic, unlike the London critics, did not sit on the fence until he saw which way the cat was jumping.

"Madame Melba possesses a marvellous soprano voice, equal, pure, brilliant, and mellow, remarkably resonant in the middle register, and using with a perfect *pastosità* up to the acute region of that fairy-



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like major third which is called *ut, re mi*, above the lines. Her personal appearance was an advantage to her; tall, slender, gifted with an expressive physiognomy. It was Ophelia herself who charmed all eyes and touched all hearts while interpreting with supreme virtuosity the Mad Scene. That which ravished us was not alone the virtuosity, the exceptional quality of that sweetly-timbred voice, the facility of executing at random, diatonic and chromatic scales, and the trills of the nightingale. It was also that profound and touching simplicity which caused a thrill to pass through the audience with those simple notes of the middle voice : ‘*Je suis Ophélie.*’”

During the entr’acte, Christine Nillson came to her dressing-room, and, embracing her enthusiastically, cried : “*La vieille Ophélie salue la jeune Ophélie.*” She was followed by Ambroise Thomas and Gounod, who could hardly speak for emotion. What a triumph for the young singer to whom London had been so unkind !

The opera at that time was extremely brilliant, both socially and musically. Paris society in those days was not the noisy, Americanized, cosmopolitan society of to-day, with a few of the old families of the *faubourg* sulking in the background. It still had much of the polish and *chic* of the Napoleonic days, and New York had not yet begun to exercise its baleful influence in the disintegration of European civilization. There was a galaxy of talent at the opera, including Jean and Edouard de Reszke, Plançon and Lassalle, and to have a box was a social necessity. And Paris, always generous to the artiste it stamps with its approval, acclaimed the new *prima donna* with rapture. She met everybody. Madame Marchesi took her to see Sara Bernhardt, then at the height of her fame and eccentricity. Her dressing-room at the theatre was rather like a circus

tent. The ceiling was draped, there were animals' heads on the walls, horns on the mantelpiece, bear-skin and tiger-skin rugs on the floor, and even a stuffed tiger and some snakes. Mingled with all this dead mammalia, were busts and portraits of Sara herself, and a collection of antiques of every description. Sara greeted her with a torrent of words. Did she like Paris? Did she like Marchesi? Who had brought her there? Above all, did she like Sara Bernhardt? She then began to give her a lesson on how to play Marguerite in *Faust*. "When Valentin curses you as he dies, and tells you that owing to your sin your white hands must never spin again, what must you do? You must hide them behind your back, ashamed, terrified, as though you wished you might cut them off. See!" And she whipped her hands behind her back, with a look of torture that haunted Melba ever afterwards when she heard Valentin sing the words: *Sois maudite*. Alas! Melba herself was never able to call up a look of tragedy more intense than that of a lady who has forgotten the name of the gentleman who is taking her out to supper and doesn't want to hurt his feelings.

It is a remarkable thing that Sara Bernhardt, in spite of her celebrated *voix d'or*, was absolutely unmusical. To her, music was merely a noise, tiresome, but occasionally necessary, and so far as it was possible she ignored its existence. It was the same with languages. To her there was only one language—French; only one nation—France. She considered the inhabitants of all other countries as being little removed from a savage state. America she disliked particularly. "It is so uncomfortable," she said. She never stopped acting, even when dying. There she lay with scarlet lips and rouged face, wearing her best flaxen wig, waiting *en grande tenue* to defy Death. Why should he come to seek her—she who to all intents and purposes was already of his Kingdom?

Ah! but he did. Death is very tidy: he gathers up all his belongings, even the *débris*.

Melba had taken a charming apartment in the rue de Prony, the next street to the rue Jouffroy in which Madame Marchesi lived, and she went to see her every day, working with her and consulting her about the thousand details of the Parisian life, which Marchesi knew so well. It was a pleasant existence, for with her iron constitution she had not, like so many famous singers, to forgo nearly all the pleasures of life in order to keep fit. Melba was no Puritan; she was young and liked the society of her men friends, so people began to talk, as people will talk when a young and attractive woman who is a celebrated operatic star, separated from her husband, is in question. It is a curious thing that the French, perhaps the most intelligent of all peoples, have never been able to believe that it is possible for a woman, however talented, to achieve success in anything, *quoi que ce soit*, unless she makes a practical use of her personal attractions. If she is obviously a dragon of virtue so far as *men* are concerned, they at once place her in a different category, and if she is really too ugly to have any sex appeal, they credit her with all sorts of secret vices. One can only imagine that success, above all success in the theatrical or musical world, is in Paris so often arrived at *via* the *cabinet particulier*, that they think things must be the same in every other country.

*Malgré les Français*, there are any number of singers, above all Anglo-Saxon singers, who preserve their virtue under the most difficult circumstances. You can tell it from their singing! Unfortunately, supreme artistic gifts and *une vertue féroce* rarely make good bedfellows. Far be it from me to suggest that Queen Victoria's famous phrase when she received the news of her accession to the throne, "I will be good," is not a suitable motto for budding

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operatic stars. Life, especially the life of the theatre, holds in store many "A Present for a Good Girl." Only it is apt to be a more valuable present if she is not *too* good! Perhaps I can better express what I mean to convey by saying that virtue must not take the form of a prim Puritanism. A great artist understands and sympathizes with life in all its manifestations, for without sympathy and understanding there is no great art.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MELBA IN LONDON—1888-1900 (*Continued*)

LADY DE GREY had written to Melba, saying, “ If you come back, I promise you it will be very different,” and she more than kept her word. How different things were to be, Melba herself hardly guessed. Lady de Grey and her friends in the smart musical set had done their work well, and their task had been made a great deal easier by the news of Melba’s brilliant success in Paris. A kind of *mot d’ordre* had gone forth that everybody who was anybody was to be at the opera on June 15, and critics were gently given to understand that the powers that be had taken Melba under their protection.

The opera was *Romeo et Juliette*, sung in French for the first time in London. It was a wonderful cast. Melba, of course, was Juliette, Jean de Reszke, Romeo, Edouard de Reszke, the Friar, and that popular and useful little artiste, Mademoiselle Bauermeister, was the Nurse. Mancinelli conducted. The audience was worthy of the cast. The Prince and Princess of Wales were in the Royal Box, and all the leaders of society were present in force. At that time the social leaders were very great ladies indeed. The reign of the pushing American of doubtful ancestry was still far off. Among the audience Lady de Grey had brought to Covent Garden that night were those five lovely women, the Duchess of Leinster, the Duchess of Sutherland, the Countess of Warwick,

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Lady Dudley and Mrs. Cornwallis-West; and others there were the old Duchess of Devonshire, whom everyone feared on account of her sharp tongue and catty disposition; Lady Cynthia Graham, Lady Helen Vincent, and, of course, all the best known men in London. There was that indescribable atmosphere which one senses on a big night at the opera.

And Melba triumphed from first to last. After the Valse, *Je veux vivre*, which she sang as no one else ever has sung it, there was a tempest of applause, and at the end she received a regular ovation. The papers the next day lauded her to the skies, as they would have done the previous year had she had the same advantages as on this occasion. It is everything to be able to show off one's talents in a proper setting; above all in the case of a singer. English critics, as a rule, like to be very sure that an artiste is one to be reckoned with, before expressing any very decided opinions about him. So do the English people, and that is why in England, once you have made a big name and conquered the affections of the public, you can go on singing until you are a hundred years old, and completely *gaga*; voice and everything gone long ago. Madame Melba, an Australian singer who had had a success in a second-rate capital, was one thing. Madame Melba, basking in the sunshine of Royalty, and taken up by the powerful Lady de Grey and her *entourage* was very much another thing. This is the strain in which the papers now spoke of her. "Madame Melba seems absolutely incapable of a false intonation, and is almost unsurpassed in the purity and sweetness of her tones. Her shake is close and even, and the few embellishments she introduces are almost invariably in good taste, and in all she does, sincerity and dramatic force are conspicuous." Rather a change from the year before!

In July she sang at the first of the many Command

performances in which she took part at Covent Garden. It was in honour of the Shah of Persia. Albani, Nordica, Scalchi, the de Reszkes, Lassalle, and Mancinelli also appeared. Melba had arrived.

Lady de Grey not only saw to it that her *protégée* was properly launched at Covent Garden, she introduced her to the whole of society, from the Prince and Princess of Wales downwards, giving wonderful parties for her. There is now perhaps no one in London powerful enough to do for an artiste what Lady de Grey could do for anyone she chose to take up. Even were there a social leader endowed with her beauty, rank, and intelligence, present conditions would make her task extremely difficult. Society now-a-days is a much less close formation than it used to be. It has not much money to spend, it is more cosmopolitan and democratic, and it is divided into too many *cliques*, political, sporting, artistic, and so on. Unfortunately, too, the artistic set is not particularly distinguished socially. Our King and Queen, admirable as they are, are not social leaders in the sense that King Edward and Queen Alexandra were, and their interest in artistic matters is of the slightest. They are very rarely to be seen at the opera, and never at concerts. This is a pity, for Royal patronage has a distinct value, and never did the arts stand in greater need of encouragement than at the present time. And there is no real civilization in a country where the arts are neglected.

At the time of which I am speaking, if you were in Lady de Grey's set, you would meet the Prince and Princess of Wales constantly; at Alfred de Rothschilds', the Charles Beresfords', the Hwfa-Williams' and other houses, and also at weekend parties and race meetings. It was the same when the Prince became the King. He was not, strictly speaking, musical, but he loved opera, and from the first he was kindness itself to Melba. Once

at a lunch-party at which the Prince, the Duchess of Manchester, Lady de Grey, Melba, and the Marquis de Soveral were present, a message came asking if Melba could possibly sing at the opera that evening. She was about to refuse, when the Prince looked at her and smiled, saying: "I am going to Covent Garden myself to-night, so *please*, Madame Melba, send back another answer." At the present time a singer, no matter how famous, and how big a social lion, would have but little chance of meeting Their Majesties unless commanded to Buckingham Palace.

Melba told of a musical party given by Lady de Grey at her house in Bruton Street upstairs, while her daughter, Lady Juliet Duff, was giving another downstairs. The Princess of Wales was the great attraction at Lady de Grey's party, and a Punch and Judy show at Lady Juliet's. Very soon the mathematical axiom was proved inaccurate and the less contained the greater, for as soon as the Princess heard about the Punch and Judy she ran downstairs to see the fun. At another of Lady de Grey's parties, an American lady, on being presented to the Prince, swept a real musical comedy curtsey, almost going on to her knees instead of giving the conventional little bob. He looked at her coldly and said: "Have you lost anything?" Royal parties were rather expensive. Hector Baltazzi, when he won the Derby, celebrated his victory by giving a dinner to the Prince, and placing a fine pearl in each soup plate. I have never found a pearl in my soup, but I once found a caterpillar in my salad, and at one of the smartest restaurants in London, too!

Melba herself said that it was a long time before she really felt at home in, and a part of, the *vie de luxe* in which she now moved, but her success grew with dazzling rapidity. In 1890, she, with the de Reszkes and Tosti, was commanded to sing to Queen Victoria

and the German Emperor, who was staying at Windsor. There was none of the consideration and attention paid them that King Edward always showed to artistes. There had been some mistake about their train, and there was no carriage to meet them, so they were obliged to take an old four-wheeled cab. They were shown into a little ante-room, and though the performance was for four o'clock, it was some time before anyone arrived to conduct them to the Presence. At half-past four an equerry came to explain the delay, which was due to the fact that the German Empress had not returned from her drive, and to say that the Queen would receive them alone. As they entered the room, the little old lady took a step towards them, shook hands, and asked them a few questions about their careers. There was a long silence, and Melba, who was singing at Covent Garden that evening, began to get anxious. When it was nearly five the Queen said: "The Empress is very late, I think we will begin." They sang till half-past five, ending with the Trio from *Faust*. At last the Empress arrived, and to Melba's dismay, the Queen said: "You have missed a great treat. We must have more for you." They repeated the performance, and finally Melba managed to whisper to one of the ladies-in-waiting that she was singing that night. Her Majesty was informed, and after thanking them she dismissed them graciously. As they left they were each handed a little packet. Melba's contained a small brooch of pearls and rubies, Jean de Reszke received gold links, Edouard, gold and platinum links, and Tosti a gold pencil. Not a very expensive entertainment for Her Majesty! Melba just managed to scramble into her clothes—she was singing Gilda—and run on to the stage in time for her entrance.

This was not the only occasion on which she was summoned to sing before Queen Victoria, but on the second, a State Concert, she was prevented from

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appearing owing to a bad cold. She was in luck. By all accounts those State Concerts, which were held in the ballroom in Buckingham Palace, must have been ghastly functions. Her Majesty sat alone in front, in a gilt chair, and around her were grouped the Royal Family and the Court officials. Behind were row upon row of the *élite* of the aristocracy, the men in Court dress or uniform, the women in their very best clothes, and wearing all their family jewels, many of them in the most lumpy and hideous settings. No applause was permitted unless Her Majesty gently gave the signal, and then it was *discreet* to say the least of it. What an atmosphere to sing in! The programme generally consisted of classical *arias*, and selections from the older Italian operas, varied occasionally by violin or piano solos, or performances by the Court orchestra. The influence of the "ever-lamented" still pervaded the solemn assembly, and I think that the august old lady, as she sat there, tired, stiff, and formidable, thought wistfully how music had degenerated since "Dear Albert" had left for a higher sphere—where he would most assuredly be asked to direct the celestial concerts—and how poor was this musical fare compared with the solid slabs of oratorio which "our dear Mr. Mendelssohn" had been wont to set before them in the 'forties. But she was Queen of England and Empress of India, and the arts, however unimportant, must be encouraged. And in giving these dreary concerts she sincerely felt that she was doing all that was necessary to encourage them.

It was at about this period that Melba met the Duc d'Orléans, at the house of a mutual friend in Paris. He was young, gay, and extremely good-looking; so was Melba. They were exactly suited to each other, and soon became devoted friends, going everywhere together and delighting in each other's society. Melba, fresh from the freedom of Australia,

and knowing and caring but little for the traditions of the old world, saw no harm in it, and naturally neither did the Duke. There is no knowing what might have come of their friendship had not Melba already had a husband who was no husband, and had not the Duke been rigidly bound by the iron-bound conventions of that ancient and Royal House. But life is full of “it might have beens.”

Of course rumour got busy! It always does when two young people are obviously made for each other and know it; especially when one is already a coming operatic star, and the other a Royal Duke, but rumour had no foundation in fact. That which attracted the Duke in Melba was her *joie de vivre*, boyishness, overflowing health, and her indifference to the conventions which had hemmed him in ever since he was born, and to her this fascinating young “Prince Charming” seemed a being from another world. In after life, when time had separated them, the Duke used often to say that her voice was the only voice that ever thrilled him.

Melba had long wanted to see Vienna and visit its famous opera-house. So had the Duke, and with their complete indifference to wagging tongues, off they went together.

Unfortunately, there were not wanting people to make mischief; there never are, and fate was against her. One night the tenor, Van Dyk, was singing *Lohengrin*. He had met Melba in Brussels, and between one of the acts, as he stood behind the curtain and looked through the small opening which enables the artistes to see the public, he was surprised to see her sitting in a box with the Duke. It happened that night that a friend of his, a journalist attached to the *Vienna Tageblatt*, was also behind the scenes, and Van Dyk called him, and drawing him to the curtain, said: “Look and tell me if you know who those two people are in that box.” “No. Who are

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they?" asked the journalist. "That is Melba, and her friend is the Duc d'Orléans," said the tenor.

That night at supper the journalist met Madame Blanche Marchesi, who was then married and living in Vienna, and he told her he had written a paragraph about Melba and the Duke being seen together, and that it would appear in the next morning's paper. He wouldn't listen to her when she begged him to stop its publication. Madame Marchesi could not speak to Melba as she did not know where she was staying. However, the next morning before she was up, in walked Melba, fresh and radiant. "You pack up and go back to Paris," said Marchesi. "Why?" said Melba. Marchesi handed her the *Vienna Tageblatt* without a word. "Oh!" said Melba, and she went back to the hotel, and left for France. But her husband, who was keeping a watch on her, had already been cabled to, and once again tried to stir up trouble. Eventually she managed to divorce him on the plea of desertion.

Melba and the Duke always remained friends. They both delighted in schoolboy larks. On one occasion after the Orléans family had been banished from France, Melba bet him that she would get him over the frontier and back again without any interference on the part of the authorities. She won her bet. They were in Germany, and she hired a carriage, dressed him in livery, and made him act as her coachman. Melba, the world-famous *prima donna*, was bowed in by the *gendarmes* with flattering respect, and her liberal tips made her extremely popular with them. Her "coachman" was, of course, a person of no account. They lunched in France, and returned without the slightest *contretemps*.

The Vienna incident set Paris talking again. The moral code of Frenchwomen was at that time very rigid—for other women—and people were rather hard

on Melba. But old Madame Marchesi, who had come to regard her as a daughter, invited her to stay with her until things had calmed down. Melba, with that intense loyalty she always displayed to anyone who had ever been kind to her, adored "Madame" and her husband. When the old couple celebrated their golden wedding, it was she who took the whole arrangements into her capable hands, and herself gave a big musical party, at which she and other famous pupils sang. In her last years the old lady came to rely on her utterly, even to the exclusion of her own family.

Melba and Blanche Marchesi did not get on too well together. Both had very strong personalities, and, as so often happens, the personalities clashed. Blanche, but for one thing, would have been her mother's greatest pupil. She has a genius for interpretation equal to that of Elena Gerhardt, and she is far more versatile than Gerhardt, for she is equally at home in English, French, German, and Italian, and has an extraordinary knowledge of the song literature in all those languages. Had she chosen, she could have rivalled Yvette Guilbert as a *diseuse*, and in the old French traditional songs, such as *La Mort de Jean Renaud*, the Nativity songs, and the Troubadour music of Provence. I have heard her interpret the German *lieder* as well as any living singer, and her singing of old Italian music is unique —no one who has heard her in such songs as Scarlatti's *Violette* could forget the experience. Not only that, she has studied the English Tudor music, and made it her own. Her interpretations of those lovely songs "Have you seen but a whyte lily grow?" and Purcell's "When I am laid in earth" are of supreme beauty. But alas! Nature did not endow her with a voice to match her talents. Had she had that of, let us say Ternina, or Freda Leider, she would have been the greatest of all Isoldes, but she had

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neither the power nor the range necessary for the operatic stage.

Melba, with her more limited musical nature, and her rudimentary sense of drama, had that wonderful God-given voice, and as both she and Blanche Marchesi were conscious of their own limitations, I am afraid that neither singer was sparing in her criticisms of the other. Blanche Marchesi could not hide her contempt for Melba's histrionic powers, and for her lack of interest in the higher branches of song and opera, while Melba always regretted in that kindly way in which singers speak of each other, that "poor Blanche" hadn't the voice to enable her to sing the rôles she would have liked to undertake, and in which she would have been *hors de concours*. Marchesi was at one time rather inclined to put down to the machinations of Melba the fact that she did not find a home at Covent Garden, but I think without justification. They would not have been rivals, as Blanche Marchesi was born to sing Wagner. However one may criticize the policy of the different syndicates that have been responsible for opera at the theatre, they have always made it a point of honour to engage the very best singers in the world. Besides which, Blanche Marchesi's mother had enormous influence in the opera-houses of the world, and could easily have smoothed over all difficulties.

Perhaps the most interesting personality with whom Melba had come into contact, indeed, one might almost say the most interesting personality in Paris, was Hermann Bemberg. The gods are very capricious in their dealings with humanity. They frequently endow people whose bodies are sickly and unattractive with brilliant and subtle intellects : Pope, Voltaire, and Snowden, for instance. They seem to delight in giving genius, and denying the stability and character necessary to use it wisely, as in the case of Villon and Oscar Wilde, while they will give perfect

physical beauty to a fool, or . . . a Film Star! Only occasionally do they give with both hands, full measure, pressed, and running over. Such measure they meted out to Mendelssohn and to Liszt, and, though in a lesser degree, to Hermann Bemberg.

He was born in Paris in 1861, his father being a rich Argentine banker, and his mother—who was an excellent amateur singer—a Spaniard of very good family. From his early boyhood he showed an extraordinary talent for music. He played the piano extremely well, and he studied harmony with Bizet and Henri Maréchal. Later on he entered the Conservatoire and continued his studies under Théodore Dubois, Gounod, and Massenet, and later on carried off the Rossini prize. His natural talent for composition was remarkable. Massenet once said to me: “It is a good thing for all of us composers that Bemberg was born rich.” Apart from his musical talents, he was physically very attractive, tall, graceful, and extremely good-looking, and as if all this was not enough, he was gifted with a *joie de vivre* and wit that I have never seen equalled except perhaps in the case of Oscar Wilde. And in addition to all these advantages, he possessed rich parents with a lovely apartment in the Avenue du Bois du Boulogne, in which they entertained largely. It is not difficult to imagine the success he had in Paris society, which has never regarded wit with the suspicion with which it is regarded in London.

There was something curiously faun-like about him. He reminded me of the “Pied Piper of Hamlin,” or of young Bacchus and his kin, whom neither the merry maidens nor the jolly satyrs could resist.

“Bacchus, young Bacchus! Good or ill betide,  
We dance before him through kingdoms wide.  
Come hither, lady fair, and joined be,  
To our wild Ministresy!”

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Melba and Bemberg were destined to be lifelong friends. This is how she tells of their first meeting.

"I was sitting in my little *salon* in the Avenue Victor Hugo when very slowly and softly the door opened. I could not imagine what it was, and I was just going to shut it when through the crack there was pushed a magnificent bouquet of orchids. This was decidedly intriguing. '*Qui êtes vous?*' I cried. The door opened, and I saw a very handsome young man, who advanced towards me, precipitated himself on his knees, and said: 'Only Bemberg.' I began to laugh. It was then noon, and I went on laughing the whole afternoon and most of the evening until midnight. That was the effect Bemberg had on me."

Another anecdote she told of him was of a drive they took in his dog-cart when she was staying at his father's country house. Melba was driving, and as they reached the village of Meudon, Bemberg began taking off his hat and bowing low to everyone they met—rustic maidens, priests, old women: even errand boys. The news went forth that some famous personage was visiting the village, and a crowd gathered. At last Melba could stand it no longer, and handed the reins to Bemberg.

Bemberg, like so many Frenchmen of that day, cared very little about dress. Melba once took a house on the river for the summer and asked him down, telling him not to bring town clothes. He arrived in a blazer of many colours, which he said was what all sporting English gentlemen wore, and ready-made flannel trousers, which, after he had worn them a few hours, split when he sat down. He was not in the least worried about it.

As with so many Frenchmen of his generation, he detested all sports. Once, when Melba's nephew, Gerald Patterson, was playing at Wimbledon a few years ago, she prevailed on Bemberg to accompany them to see him play. After a time he disappeared,



HERMANN BEMBERG



and as he did not know Wimbledon, and they were all dining together, as soon as the match was over they went to look for him. They found him sitting in the car, very bad-tempered. He said he was “ sick of seeing nothing but balls ! ” Young Frenchmen nowadays are all devoted to sport and intensely particular about their clothes. They are, in fact, *tous ce qu'il y'en a de plus correct.*

In 1892 his opera *Elaine* was given at Covent Garden. It was his first—and only—work on a large scale, though he had previously, in 1889, brought out a one-act opera in Paris at the *Opéra-Comique*, called *Le Baiser de Suzon*, for which Paul Barbier had written the libretto, and he had also been the first to write music for Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*. *Elaine* was given every advantage possible. It was sung by Melba, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, and Pol Plançon, and had a *succès d'estime*. Bemberg, however, was not satisfied with it, and he withdrew it in order to revise it. The revised version was given in the following year with considerable success.

Bemberg, as he himself frankly acknowledged afterwards, was not born to write “ grand ” opera ; his gifts were purely of the lyric order. He had real melodic invention, grace, good taste, and genuine feeling. His orchestration was always effective, and his recitative excellent. Above all, he wrote beautifully for the voice. There are some delightful things in *Elaine*, notably the lovely air, in the first act, *L'amour est pur comme la flamme*, with its original rhythm, the final scene *L'air est léger*, and the prayer, *Dieu de Pitié*, in the third act, but his dramatic sense was not strong enough to sustain one’s interest throughout the opera.

Bemberg was not a great composer. There are very few great composers. What he would have been had he chosen to develop his talents, one cannot tell. That he would have been a serious rival to

Massenet, however, is fairly certain. I know, of course, that people sneer at Gounod, Massenet, Bemberg, Goring Thomas, and their contemporaries, but many of their songs had grace, melody, and real sincerity: qualities which are singularly lacking in those of most of the minor song-writers of to-day, who waste their time imitating Schönberg and Stravinsky, or the latest "fad" in Paris. I cannot help feeling that some of these songs will come back into fashion. Who would not rather listen to *D'une Prison* and *Crépuscule* of Massenet, *Chant Venetien* or *Nymphs et Sylvains* of Bemberg, or that lovely song, "Winds in the Trees" by Goring Thomas, than to the songs of Goossens, or Eric Satie? These songs are not great music, but then neither are their pretentious present-day equivalents, which are merely "up-to-date" music, just the same as is the latest form of jazz. For our serious moments there is a large literature of authentically great songs, but there are moments—after a good dinner for instance—when we do not wish to be given a song recital, and I maintain that at those times the type of song of which I have been speaking is very delightful to listen to.

Bemberg, in spite of his puckish nature, was one of the kindest people alive, I can testify to that. I have spoken of him in the past tense, as his activities belong so essentially to the period of which I am writing. He is happily still alive, but alas! the days are come to him—as indeed to so many of those of whom I have spoken—when the "strong men bow themselves, and the daughters of music are brought low."<sup>1</sup>

This same year—1892—was an eventful year for Melba. With Calvé and the inevitable de Reszkes, she was commanded to Windsor, where they performed

<sup>1</sup> Bemberg died while this book was in the press.

*Carmen* before Queen Victoria and her Court. Melba took the part of Micaela, which part, by the way, she also sang once at the *Opéra-Comique*, and afterwards in New York with Zélie de Lussan. She also sang it in London in 1890 at the last performance of the season, on which occasion Jean de Reszke made his first appearance as Don José. I give the cast.

*Special Announcement*

AN EXTRA NIGHT  
and Farewell Performance  
will be given on  
MONDAY, JULY 28th,

on which occasion will be Performed (in French)  
Bizet's Opera,

CARMEN

With the following powerful cast:

Micaela . . . . .	Madame MELBA
Frasquita . . . . .	Mlle REGINA PINKERT
Mercedes . . . . .	Mlle BAUERMEISTER
Carmen . . . . .	Mlle ZÉLIE DE LUSSAN

Escamillo . . . . .	M. LASSALLE
Dancairo . . . . .	Signor BIELETTO
Remendado . . . . .	Signor RINALDINI
Morales . . . . .	Signor MIRANDA
Zuniga . . . . .	Signor DE VASCHETTI
Don José . . . . .	M. JEAN DE RESZKE (His first appearance in this character.)

Mr. Stedman's Choir of Boys.

Ballet arranged by Madame Katti Lanner.

Première Danseuse ... Mlle PALLADINO

The First and Last Acts will be conducted by  
Signor MANCINELLI.

The Second Act by

Signor BEVIGNANI.

The Third Act by

Signor RANDEGGER.

COVENT GARDEN  
(Season 1890)

After the performance at Windsor, Calvé and Melba embraced each other affectionately on the stage. I don't think they ever did so in private life. Their amenities rather remind one of that amusing cartoon in *Punch* where one woman is writing a letter, and another who is sitting reading, asks: "Are you writing to Ethel, dear? Give her my fond love. Heavens! How I detest that woman!" In this year, too, she sang *Aida* at Covent Garden, but it was not *her* opera, as she soon realized, and she loathed the make-up it entailed. She also sang Elsa in *Lohengrin* for the first time, another part which did not suit her, but *en revanche*, she added Desdemona to her *répertoire*. I have seen many Desdemonas, in many countries, but never one to equal hers, and wonderful to relate, she was completely satisfying in it from the dramatic point of view.

There have been many wonderful performances at Covent Garden during its long history, and one of the most wonderful was a performance of *Faust*, which I heard there in 1895, with Melba, Alvarez, and Plançon. Everyone seemed inspired that night. This undoubtedly happens sometimes. I remember many years later, hearing *Aida* with Nordica and Caruso. Bemberg and I were together in Melba's box, and he said to me afterwards: "You will never again hear *Aida* sung like that." I never have. In 1895 Melba's voice was at its very best; a "best" which lasted for many years, and on the evening of which I am speaking the three great artistes fairly "sang the roof off" in the Final Trio. The enthusiasm was so tremendous that I thought the audience would keep on recalling them till the next day. The season of 1895 was one of the gayest I ever remember, but it brought the terrible Wilde tragedy. It is foolish to laud past times at the expense of one's own, and equally foolish, perhaps, to boast of the "progress" we have made, but all the same I do not

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think such a nauseating exhibition of hypocrisy, savagery, and unchristianity as that which his trial and conviction called forth, would be possible now-a-days.

The following year Sir Augustus Harris died at the early age of forty-four, killed by overwork. It is curious and highly typical of our art-loving country that his knighthood was conferred on him for his capable performance of his duties as a sheriff of the City of London, not for his services to music! He had managed to make each season an improvement on its predecessor, and lived to see the grand opera season firmly established. Soon after his death the "Grand Opera Syndicate" was formed with the popular Harry Higgins as chairman.

In 1897 Melba took part in the State performance which was given to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. They were marvellous spectacles, those State performances. When we English choose to go in for pageantry there is no country in the world which can touch us. In Italy and on the Continent generally, they do not pay the same attention to detail, and, above all, they don't spend so much money, so you frequently see a combination of richness and squalor that would be impossible in England. But artistically there is not much to be said for gala performances. They invariably consisted of detached acts from various operas, sung by all the most famous singers in the company. On this occasion they did the third act of *Romeo et Juliette* with Melba and de Reszke, the second act of *Tannhäuser* with Emma Eames, Van Dyk, Plançon, Meux, and Renaud, and the fourth act of *Les Huguenots* with Macintyre and Alvarez. An odd mixture.

So time went on, and the nineteenth century drew towards its close. A new composer of opera appeared who was to carry all before him. His name was Giacomo Puccini. New singers, too, came into favour. But never a one to rival the supremacy of Melba.

## CHAPTER SIX

### MELBA IN LONDON—1888-1900 (*Continued*)

TOWARDS the end of the nineteenth century London society began to change very rapidly. Queen Victoria, who never emerged from her shell except for some important occasion, a Jubilee, a Royal wedding, or, better still, a funeral, was ceasing to count as a social force, but the long tradition of "Victorianism" still exercised very considerable influence. Her expressed disapproval of any person, however exalted, had devastating consequences, and any relaxing of the hard and fast rules which obtained at her Court was carefully kept from her. In many—among them some of the most important—country houses, life went on exactly as it had done for the last fifty years; indeed, one might almost say, the last hundred years, for, apart from the coming of the railway, the penny post, and the telegraph, things changed very little in rural England between the end of the eighteenth century and the last decade of the nineteenth.

But in London, where the fashionable world had long been led by the Prince of Wales, things were very different, and it was at about this period that the much-talked-of "smart set" came into being. Chief among its leaders was Lady de Grey, one of the Herberts, a great lady of the Renaissance type; tall, beautiful, and swan-like; insolently sure of herself, and serenely indifferent to the opinions of any world but her own. Others were the Duchess of Sutherland, equally beautiful in her Greuze-like way, Lady

Feo Sturt, Lady Charles Beresford, the Duchess of Devonshire, Mrs. Hwfa-Williams, witty and amusing, the Arthur Wilsons—Miss Muriel Wilson was the Lady Diana of her day—and, a little later, Mrs. George Keppel.

They were gay, care-free, charming people, and only asked to be amused at all costs and regardless of cost. The men raced, shot, gambled, made love, and helped to run the country *tant bien que mal*, after the manner of their kind; and the women raced, danced, dressed, gambled, patronized suitable charities, and were made love to, after the manner of *their* kind. This last distraction was then, as now, the most popular. There is an amusing story of a certain great lady who owned a magnificent pearl necklace which one of her friends greatly envied. “What lovely pearls, dear!” she said. “If they were mine, I should be *so* afraid of losing them. Don’t they keep you awake at night?” “Not now, darling,” was the reply. “They did before I owned them!” There is a charming story of a fair friend of King Edward, who, on leaving Buckingham Palace one day, hailed a hansom and said to the driver: “King’s Cross.” “Lor, Mum, is ‘e now? I *am* sorry,” said the cabby.

How wonderfully they carried off their affairs, those great ladies! Now-a-days, the grand manner is no longer needed, as nobody cares a damn about the morals of their friends. Melba told an amusing story of a visit to the Casino at Monte Carlo. She and Lady de Grey were playing at the tables, separated by a fat, bearded Frenchman. They were both having very good luck; not so the Frenchman however, who grumbled and snorted and kept glancing furiously at the two ladies. Every stake he made went wrong, and at last he got up and exclaimed: “What can I expect sitting between two *cocottes*!” Lady de Grey shook with laughter, and leaning across to Melba,

said: "Please don't say a word to him; I have never been so flattered in my life."

They saw a good deal of Sir Arthur Sullivan on that visit to Monte Carlo. His greatest passion in life was racing and gambling. Though only fifty-six, he was already old and tired, and his hand was so shaky that when he stretched it out to play, the money would fall on the wrong numbers. The croupiers were very kind to him and allowed him plenty of time. The old Duchess of Devonshire was one of their party. She was an intensely disagreeable player, whether at roulette or bridge, and took every advantage permitted to her. Melba noticed that, as so often happens, the very rich men were the most careful of their money. William K. Vanderbilt would keep check of every louis he risked, and so would Baron Hirsch, who was a great friend of the Prince of Wales. One evening Melba had been losing rather a lot and ran out of money. Seeing the Baron standing by she asked him to lend her a thousand francs. He frowned and hesitated, and finally did so. The next day she sent him a cheque for the amount, and in reply got a letter saying that she was the first woman who had ever paid him back the money she had borrowed, and enclosing a lovely diamond brooch which he begged her to accept.

Women had not yet taken very violently to golf or tennis, and, of course, motoring and flying had not arrived. Neither did they smoke incessantly and drink cocktails, so music and musicians occupied a much more important place in their scheme of existence than it does to-day. But the musicians must be attractive and vouched for by someone in whom they had confidence—Bemberg, or Tosti, for instance; and they must not be dull and insist on singing German *lieder* or playing Bach!

Society people take up only those artistes who are good showmen. They listened respectfully to Ysaye

—when they were obliged to—because they had been told that he was acclaimed “ King of Violinists ” by the violinists themselves, but they engaged Kubelik to play for them. They adored Mischa Elman when he was a little boy with bare legs, because they like little bare-legged boys who do wonderful things on the violin, but they ignore Mischa Elman in his great maturity. They grovelled at the feet of Paderewski, but they will have nothing to do with that superlatively fine pianist, Alexandre Borovsky, because he has no tricks of any kind. And the fuss they make over Chaliapine, whose overacting distorts every opera in which he appears to such an extent that all sense of proportion is lost, is past believing.

It was still an exclusive world ; its affairs were all conducted with a certain amount of dignity, and a party such as I went to recently very late in the evening would not have been possible. At this party, at which were present a minor Royalty or two, and most of the present smart set, the waiters when I arrived were so drunk that it was next to impossible to get any attention. The buffet was strewn with upset bottles of champagne and beer and broken food. On sofas women were lying in men’s arms, and one famous beauty—a little *passe* now—was sitting with glazed eyes, trying vainly to raise a glass of champagne to her lips.

But the exclusiveness of Victorian society was breaking down. As I have already said, it wanted to be amused at all costs, and it had begun to realize that people who were not in Debrett could be very amusing. Besides which, it was a period of lavish spending, and all sorts of odd people—Jews, South Africans, even people in trade—had money, and asked nothing better than to be allowed to spend it on them.

The Prince of Wales, while intensely tenacious of his personal dignity, was tolerance itself, and minded very little what company he kept, so long as it had

unlimited wealth and kept him amused. One of his great friends was Baron Hirsch, another, Sir Ernest Cassel, and he even admitted Sir Thomas Lipton to his circle of intimates. Apropos of Sir Thomas, whom everyone liked, a very Victorian *grande dame* once told me that King Edward, soon after he came to the throne, was speaking to her at Ascot one day and seeing Sir Thomas standing near, said : " I don't think you know Sir Thomas Lipton, Lady William ? " The old lady replied : " No, Sir, neither do I wish to, and I cannot imagine what your dear mother would have said had she seen you hobnobbing with your grocer ! " His Majesty replied good-naturedly : " Ah, Lady William, you are behind the times ! There won't be many more kings, and I want to enjoy life while I can. "<sup>1</sup>

Society, however, while receiving these people, made it clear that it was only on sufferance. The condescension had to be repaid in kind : by elaborate parties, racing, and financial tips—which must not turn out badly—and discreetly offered gifts. Hichens, in his novel *Flames*, and E. F. Benson, in *Dodo* and *Mammon and Co.*, give excellent pictures of London society in the 'nineties.

With this aristocratic and cosmopolitan world, Melba was a great success. Apart from her glorious voice and her now established fame, she had many social qualities. She was handsome, full of *joie de vivre* and vitality, adaptable, good-natured, and hospitable. She dressed extremely well, as she was wise enough to give Worth, and later Reville-Terry, *carte blanche*, following their advice down to the last detail. Then, too, she loved England, and had sent her little George to school in the country. Although she also liked Paris, and always kept an apartment there, she

<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Lipton died while this book was in the press.

felt and said that she could never really understand and sympathize with the Latin temperament.

Lady de Grey, unlike many aristocratic patrons of opera, had, as we have seen, an excellent knowledge of it. Without being strictly speaking, musical—a string quartette or an orchestral concert bored her to death—she was an extraordinarily good judge of a voice, and had a real *flair* for a singer who was likely to be successful. She had taken up Melba from the first, long before the days when she had the London public at her feet, and they became great friends. She loved the opera and rarely missed a performance; her husband was chairman of the directors. Harry Higgins and the other directors were all intimate friends, and so they played into each other's hands. Melba soon became one of the leading spirits in this little circle, and if she and Lady de Grey did not want a singer at Covent Garden, that singer had no earthly chance of an engagement.

One of the best known and most popular figures in society and at the opera was Alfred de Rothschild. The Rothschild family as leaders of the Jewish world have, of course, always held a very special position in every European capital, and Alfred was *persona grata* in the social world. Like most of his race he loved music, especially opera, and even more especially, famous *prima donnas*! He had been an intimate friend of Patti, whose money he had helped to invest, and when Melba appeared on the scene with her equally lovely voice, and her far more interesting personality, he transferred his whole-hearted allegiance to her.

He was a curious, rather pathetic little man. In spite of his great fortune, I hardly think he enjoyed life very much, as he was so obsessed with the fear of illness and death. When he had a shooting-party he used to drive to the coverts in a pony-carriage, and the keepers on the day before had to see that the way was

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perfectly smooth, and that all rabbit-holes and ruts were stopped up to avert any danger of the pony stumbling. He was always accompanied by his house physician. He kept a private band and a small circus at Halton, his place near Wendover, and, dressed up as a ringmaster, used to stand in the ring, cracking his whip : a queer little figure, but no one dared laugh. He liked to believe that all the animals knew him, as they followed him like dogs, but I fear it was rather because his pockets were stuffed with all the delicacies that ponies, monkeys, and little boys love. He adored celebrities and loaded them with gifts. It was one of his illusions that famous singers regarded him as a fellow-artiste and connoisseur, and so refused to accept fees when they sang for him. It paid them well, however, for he invariably sent them a present costing at least as much as their fee, and he was always ready to help them to make a bit in the City. Melba owed much to his financial advice, and her keen business sense earned his sincere respect. He was fond of asking his favourite "lady friends" to lunch at the Rothschild offices, and had the engaging habit of slipping a hundred-pound note in the folds of their napkins.

At one of his parties Melba met Cecil Rhodes, who asked her: "Tell me, Madame Melba, is it the art or the applause you like?" She was indignant, or professed to be so, and answered: "How dare you ask me such a question?" Rhodes looked at her for a moment, and then said: "Yes, I was wrong. After all, it's the *power* we like, isn't it?" They didn't hit it off very well. She found his long silences very boring, and I imagine that her world did not amuse him.

In 1899 a great event occurred in the operatic world; the production of Puccini's *La Bohème* which has remained one of the most consistently popular operas in the whole *répertoire*. It is not surprising, for it is a really delightful work: in some ways, I think,

the best Puccini ever wrote. Massenet told me that he considered it a “perfect opera from every point of view, melodious, original, full of feeling, and exquisitely scored.” He was quite right. *Bohème* owes something to Gounod, and also to Massenet himself, but whatever Puccini borrowed became Puccini; he gave to it a touch wholly his own. *La Bohème* seems to me an ideal rendering of Murger’s fascinating story, and I cannot understand that Krehbiel, the well-known American writer, should consider it heavy and unsatisfactory. He writes:

“I see in it an earnest and ingenious effort to knit music, text, and action closer together than it was the wont of Italian composers to do before the advent of Wagner set young Italy in a ferment. Music plays a very different rôle in it than it does in the operas of Donizetti, Bellini, and the earlier Verdi. It does not content itself with occasionally proclaiming the mood of a situation or the feelings of a conventional stage person. It attempts to supply life-blood for the entire drama; to flow through its veins without ceasing; to bear along on its surface all the whims, emotions, follies, and incidents of the story as fast as they appear; to body them forth as vividly as words and pantomime can; to colour them, vitalize them, arouse echoes and reflections of them in the hearts of the hearers. But this it can do only in association with other elements of the drama, and when these are presented only in part, and then crudely and clumsily, it must fail of its purpose. And so it happens that Puccini’s music discloses little of that brightness, piquancy, and vivacity which we are naturally led to expect from it by knowledge of Murger’s story, on which the opera is based, and acquaintance with the composer’s earlier opera, *Manon Lescaut*. One element the two works have in common: absence of the light touch of humour

demanded by the early scenes in both dramas. However, this is characteristic, not of Puccini alone, but of all the composers in the young Italian school. They know of no way to kill a gnat dancing in the sunlight except to blow it up with a broadside of trombones. Puccini's music in *La Bohème* also seems lacking in the element of characterization, an element which is much more essential in comedy music than in tragedy. Whether they are celebrating the careless pleasure of a Bohemian's carouse, or proclaiming the agonies of a consuming passion, it is all one to his singers. So soon as they drop the inter-vallic palaver (whatever that means) which points the way of the new style towards bald melodrama, they soar off in a shrieking cantilena, buoyed up by the unison strings and imperilled by strident brass, until there is no relief except exhaustion. Happy, careless music, such as Mozart or Rossini might have written for the comedy scenes in *La Bohème*, there is next to none in Puccini's score."

This seems to me a singularly inept, indeed unfair criticism. The libretto does not attempt to follow Murger's book closely: it merely gives four incidents from it, and those incidents are particularly well chosen and knit together. As for Puccini's music, it illustrates the story inimitably, and is in turn gay, pathetic, lyric, and tragic, exactly as the situation demands. "Heavy"; that delightfully gay beginning to the first act, and all the second act! As for the music Rossini *might* have written for it, think of Mimi's death scene, and then compare it with any of Rossini's attempts at pathos or tragedy.

That he should have succeeded so entirely in giving the atmosphere of Murger's book is all the more remarkable seeing how essentially French it is. It represents an aspect of life that is not in any way Italian, and—as a subject for the stage—it is not in

the Italian tradition, which has always inclined to the art of scene painting rather than that of the miniature. *La Vie de Bohème* is as French as is the Abbé Prevost's *Manon Lescaut*, on which Puccini had based his previous opera. Some of his very best music is to be found in this opera, and yet I do not think that he succeeded for one moment in reproducing the atmosphere of the book, which Massenet caught so marvellously. Des Grieux could never by any possibility have been anything but a Frenchman. An Italian would have wrung Manon's neck long before the third act, however much he loved her! Italians are intensely *male*, and incapable of that infinite patience and sympathy with the caprices of a woman which is a trait so thoroughly French. Especially when that woman is *una Troja*!

But Manon and Mimi are two very different characters. Manon was the typical butterfly, happy only when she could wear soft raiment, live in luxury, and dance in the sunshine. She loved Des Grieux in her own way, and would rather have lived with him than with anyone else, but she could not face poverty and privation. Mimi, on the other hand, was an honest French working girl, asking little of life, and ready to give herself only when she loved. Murger painted his Bohemians as they were; ugly rather than good-looking, seared by the life they led; badly dressed. But they were young and they were gay. They had a smile on their lips and their hearts were full of hope. If they wallowed in the mire, they did so with a good grace; if they were lazy, they did not ask for payment for their idleness. They frequently had neither a crust on which to sup, nor a candle-end to light them to bed, but they shrugged their shoulders and laughed again. And when a little money came their way they spent it gaily, for they were firm believers in Providence, and took no thought for the morrow.

This *milieu* was thoroughly sympathetic to Puccini. To some extent he himself had lived that life in the days when he shared with his brother a top-floor room to which one climbed by one of those interminable Italian staircases. Their combined income, apart from the few francs they managed to pick up, was one hundred lire a month. Well did their landlord know the date on which the letter containing the precious remittance was due! He was very polite on that morning, bringing it up to them himself, taking care to be able to change the note, and not retiring until he had his rent safely bestowed in his pocket-book. On other days he was less polite: the youngsters were not allowed to waste the gas by using it for cooking, and on the many days when they could not afford to take their meals at a restaurant, no matter how humble, and on which dinner consisted of dry bread and a herring, or a couple of sausages, Puccini used to play the piano and sing at the top of his voice, while his brother held the herring, or whatever it was, impaled on a fork, over the gas jet. This, in order that their landlord, who guessed what they were up to, and frequently waited outside the door to listen, should not hear the frugal meal frizzling.

Coal was another difficulty. Their order was so small that the coal merchant would not deliver it up all those stairs, so they overcame the difficulty, just as Rodolfo might have overcome it. One of them would leave the house carrying a large carpet bag, as if he were going on a journey, and the other would shout a noisy farewell from the window. In the evening after dark the *voyageur* would creep quietly in, his bag filled with coal.

Puccini revelled in every detail of *La Bohème*. He could write only when he loved his characters; when he was their friend, their brother, and lived in common with them, sharing their joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. He never at any time enjoyed paint-

ing on a large canvas. He himself said that he was a painter in miniature; that he loved the pathetic rather than the tragic, the subtle rather than the grandiose. This is very evident in his music. The attempt at tragedy in *La Tosca* amounts to little more than good incidental music, but the accents of Mimi and Rodolfo and of Madame Butterfly breathe sincerity. Puccini could not work when he was not in the mood, and would sometimes pass a month without writing a note, spending his time walking or shooting. He wrote everything at the piano, and disliked working at any other piano but his own.

I was surprised to read recently a reported remark of Sir Edward Elgar, that no true composer ever worked at the piano. Puccini is perhaps not to be counted among the giants of music, but he was a true composer if ever there was one. And how about Chopin? He wrote nearly everything at the piano; indeed, many of his compositions were completed before ever he put a note of them on paper. When he was dying he had his piano pushed to the side of his bed, and shortly before his death wrote the unutterably sad *Posthumous Mazurka*. Debussy, too, worked out his effects at the piano. Massenet, on the other hand, would not have a musical instrument in the house when he was writing an opera, and Wagner could write anywhere. So can Holbrooke, and so also, I imagine, most of the ultra-moderns. At any rate it would not much matter *what* some of them wrote down.

It was largely owing to Melba that *La Bohème* was produced at Covent Garden. It had been given in English the previous autumn with no great success; Melba had created the rôle of Mimi in New York in December, 1898, where its reception was lukewarm, and the leading American critic had written the above criticism of it. So the management were not anxious to produce it. But Melba had great faith in it. She

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had taken the trouble to go to Lucca, the charming little Tuscan walled city where Puccini was born, and had studied the opera with him, bar by bar. With regard to this visit she wrote to a friend: "Puccini came for two hours daily during the ten days of my study, and I was well pleased with the work I did. He thoroughly explained his ideas of the music, we rehearsed it bit by bit, and my score is full of his pencil markings and annotations. Some of my friends like it better than anything else I sing. I have great faith in Puccini's gifts, I delight in singing his music, and I believe him to be the coming Italian composer." And this from the singer whom her enemies were constantly accusing of not being musical! Melba, however, had her way, and on May 24, 1899, *La Bohème* was produced. Her faith in it was fully justified. It was an immediate success, and when the curtain fell she had a big ovation. The part of Rodolfo was taken by the tenor, de Lucia, the three other Bohemians were Ancona, Gilibert, and Journet, while the Musetta was that delightful artiste, Zélie de Lussan, whose Carmen was one of the best ever heard at Covent Garden.

Melba's triumph as Mimi was enormous, and rightly so. I have heard many Mimi's in many countries, but I have never heard one who could in any way be compared with her. From the moment that her thrilling voice was heard "off," to the exquisite pathos of her death in the fourth act, she held the audience spellbound. Even from the acting standpoint—the greatest flaw in her armour—there was not much to criticize, for the Mimi's of life are not dramatic, poor things; they dance and quarrel gaily in the sunshine, but when the snows of winter strew the ground they have no fight left, and Melba could express every ordinary emotion with her voice. She was not a dramatic soprano: when she attempted dramatic parts she failed, and her robust common



MELBA AS JULIET



sense caused her at once to realize her failure. Thus, she soon gave up trying to sing Elsa and Aida, both parts being physically and dramatically unsuited to her.

In the intervals of singing and rehearsing she managed to enjoy life thoroughly, especially on Sunday, which was not at that time the dull day in London that it has become since the advent of the motor-car and the week-end. On the contrary, it was a great day for entertaining. After church—for people still went to church in the morning—everyone walked in Hyde Park, the Stanhope Gate side, not the Row as on week-days. The women wore their long dresses and enormous picture-hats, and the men were immaculate in smart frock-coats, fancy waist-coats, buttonholes, and “toppers.” It was a happy hunting-ground for the young, unattached man, who, if he was not already engaged, generally met someone who asked him to lunch. A good many people kept open house for that meal, and the restaurants were crowded. The fashionable places for lunch were Prince’s and the Carlton, and for dinner, the Carlton, the Savoy and Claridge’s, though certain quite unexpected places had temporary vogues. I remember one season when everyone flocked to the Great Central Hotel on Sunday evening—I wonder if anyone could even tell you where it is now-a-days—and another summer the Hans Crescent Hotel was so popular that you had to book your table at least two weeks ahead. In the afternoon one left cards on the people at whose houses one had fed or danced, and if musically inclined, dropped in at Mrs. Ronold’s pretty little house in Cadogan Place, where the music was always excellent and the tea execrable. One was sure, however, to hear some famous pianist or violinist, and at least one operatic star.

Those who were lucky enough to be on Lady de Grey’s visiting-list drove down to Coombe Court on

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Sunday evening. It was a charming place of about fifteen acres, and in those days seemed at least a hundred miles away from London. There you met Society with the largest S. The Prince and Princess of Wales were constant visitors, and not only the smart social world, but celebrities of every kind, English and foreign, and all the operatic stars. Melba, of course, was always a guest of honour and supped at the Royal table. Sometimes late in the evening she volunteered to sing—one does not ask the Melbas of this world if they have brought their music!—and that gave the final *cachet* to these delightful parties. Where in these times can one pass Sunday evening so pleasantly? Kingston Hill at that time was extremely smart. The Hwfa-Williams were at Coombe Springs, the Charles Beresfords had Coombe Cottage, which Melba sometimes rented from them—she was so fond of it that she named her place in Australia after it—and Admiral Bridge and Baron de Forest also had week-end houses there.

In 1900, that great singer and equally great gentleman, Jean de Reszke, bid farewell to Covent Garden in *Romeo et Juliette*, with Melba as Juliette, which she had played so often to his Romeo. It was one of her best parts, as the *Daily Telegraph* said: “It was as Juliette that Madame Melba first woke the senses of opera-goers to a full appreciation of her splendid powers.” Even Patti had not been able to win favour for Gounod’s opera, and no one since Melba has been able to galvanize it into popularity, for to tell the truth it is poor stuff with the exception of two or three of the *arias*. De Reszke was one of her greatest admirers; he had, of course, been associated with all the most famous singers of his day and this is what he wrote of her:

“*La nature vous a doué d’une voix d’or, positivement la plus belle de votre temps; vous êtes*

*musicienne, vous êtes femme charmante. Toutes ces qualités peuvent être appréciées par le public, mais ce que je sais, moi, c'est que vous êtes la meilleure des camarades, et que je garderai un éternel souvenir de nos relations, artistiques et musicales. Comptez toujours sur votre dévoué.*

“ JEAN DE RESZKE.”

There have been more naturally beautiful voices than that of de Reszke, but there has probably never been so gifted a singer as he was. He spoke and sang with the same ease in five languages; he was a distinguished and accomplished actor, and a first-class musician. No other singer can claim the distinction of having been the greatest Wagnerian tenor of his day, the finest Faust, Romeo, and Don José, and to have been equally successful in Italian opera. De Reszke was not only a great artiste, he was of noble birth and extremely handsome; he had, too, an amiable, not to say affectionate, disposition, and his *bonnes fortunes* were notorious. He was one of the brightest ornaments of the Coombe Court set, and his retirement was sincerely mourned.

The end of the amusing and much written of 'nineties coincided with the “Passing of the Great Queen,” as the journalists loved to call it. Perhaps it is not too much to say that it caused a sigh of relief in certain circles. It was the end of an epoch; an epoch of unexampled prosperity and power, to which her very narrowness, provincialism, and middle-class virtues, as they have been called, contributed in no slight degree, but she had become a legendary, rather than a popular figure. King Edward was adored by the masses, and the classes looked forward to a gay and brilliant Court under his rule.

The old Queen's death occasioned a virulent attack of that peculiar brand of sentimental hypocrisy so characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race. Few of

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the younger generation had ever set eyes on her, but to read the newspapers one would have imagined that brightness had faded from the sky for ever. "Queens have died young and fair" and queens have died old and weary, but, generally speaking, it has made little difference to their subjects one way or the other. We English, however, love to wallow in sentimentality over such happenings, and pretend a passionate affection for the monarch whom we have not seen, even though we are by no means too devoted to the brother whom we have seen, perhaps for that very reason!

So Victoria slept with her fathers, and Edward, her son, reigned in her stead.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### MELBA IN LONDON—1900-1914

THE death of Queen Victoria hastened the emancipation of the “smart set” from the last shackles of Victorian tradition. A few of the old county families still lived in semi-feudal state, and refused to abate one jot of their exclusiveness either in the country or when in London, but the King’s set opened its doors—or rather its hall doors, not its boudoirs—to all and sundry, provided that all and sundry had enough money to pay its gate money without counting the change.

Americans were quick to seize the dawning of a new era, and the wives and heiresses of steel, tobacco, real estate, canned fruit, and pork and beans millionaires, invaded England in battalions, eager to be presented at Court and to buy titled husbands; dukes and earls if possible; baronets, if strawberry leaves and earldoms came too high.

Their influence was in some respects beneficial. Their demand for modern conveniences, bathrooms especially—for to the average American, modern plumbing and civilization are synonymous terms—woke up a good many of our country hotel-keepers to the deficiencies of the accommodation they had to offer, and they certainly stimulated trade. On the other hand, it is to them that we owe the gradual vulgarization and standardization of English institutions. They found nothing admirable in such dignified old hotels as Long’s and Brown’s; hotels which

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provided no palm lounges, bands, and show, but where you were really well looked after and treated like a human being. Debussy once said to me that he hated London, as it was impossible to eat good food there without being obliged to listen to bad music. This was in 1913. It is ten times worse now, and we owe it to the land of the—near-free.

The rich Jews, too, began to lift their heads higher than ever, as they no longer feared social snubs. The Lord might continue to love “the gates of Sion more than all the dwellings of Jacob”: *they* infinitely preferred the dwellings of Mayfair to either of them. It was not very difficult to launch yourself; all you had to do was to give a big and extremely expensive party and pay some impecunious countess to send out your invitations. A concert was the smartest form of entertainment, and if you could persuade Melba to sing, and perhaps, to dine with you first, you were fortunate. She would not accept every engagement offered her, which made her still more desirable. Her fee was five hundred guineas, but the *cachet* her name printed very large on the invitation cards gave to the party was worth double the money. It was quite a common thing at that time for an ambitious hostess to spend from £5,000 to £10,000 on a party. I went to one where the flowers cost £2,000.

It did not always work, though. I remember one party to which I was asked, given by a new and very rich Jewish mine-owner and his ambitious and good-looking wife. They had taken an important house, engaged the most famous singers they could get, and poured out money on the flowers and supper. Alas! When the guests saw their host waiting for them at the top of the grand staircase, many of the most desirable among them turned tail and fled. They felt they couldn’t face the music, or rather the Simian-looking gentleman who paid for it.

Those concerts were very delightful functions.

It is all very well to say that they did not advance the cause of music as the programmes consisted only of songs of the *salon* type, *arias* from operas, and *virtuoso* instrumental music, varied by recitations by famous actors, but one heard all the most celebrated singers and players in Europe under the most comfortable conditions, supped extremely well, and met one's friends. There are plenty of opportunities in London for the music-lover to indulge in any kind of serious musical orgy that appeals to him; far more indeed, than there are to hear such artistes as Melba, Paderewski, and Kreisler in one evening, without money and without price, and with supper thrown in! The "Melba" party was quite the smartest form of entertaining; some hostesses substituted Calvé or Nordica, but it was not the same thing. Those who wished their concerts to be completely successful consulted her about the other artistes who were to have the honour of contributing to the programme. She had her favourites. She never failed to include one or two of Bemberg's songs, which he invariably accompanied, thereby adding to the social distinction of the party, and she generally stipulated that her friend, Mr. Theodore Byard, should sing. Byard had one of the loveliest and most sympathetic baritone voices I have ever heard. He had, as the French say, *des larmes dans la voix*, but on an evil day someone, Jean de Reszke, I believe, persuaded him that his voice was really a tenor. Against the advice of Melba and Bemberg, he studied with de Reszke for a year, and with fatal results. When he came back he had lost his beautiful baritone voice and developed a tenor of hard quality and doubtful intonation. It was a thousand pities, but perhaps he did not lose in the long run, as he is now one of the senior partners in the famous publishing firm of Heinemann.<sup>1</sup>

Ancona was another singer who was much sought

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Byard died while this book was in the press.

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after for private musical parties. I remember an amusing incident at Mrs. John Mackay's one evening. She had engaged a juvenile prodigy violinist, Franz von Veczky, a pretty little boy with a dazzling technique, with whom all the ladies at once fell in love. After he played, it was Ancona's turn, and they were so excited over the infant, that the popular baritone fell quite flat. He wept with rage! The most wonderful musical party I have ever been to, was given by Mrs.—now Lady—George Cooper at her house, 26 Grosvenor Square. She had inherited a huge fortune from her uncle, known as "Chicago Smith," so money was no object. In addition to Melba she had engaged Sara Bernhardt, Kubelik, and Coquelin. The chief item on the programme was Bemberg's delightful setting of Murger's poem, *La Ballade du Désespéré*. Bernhardt recited the part of the poet, Melba was Death who knocked at his door, Bemberg himself accompanied, and I played the violin obligato.

The day before the party Bemberg and I called for Melba, and went to the Hyde Park Hotel where Bernhardt was staying, to rehearse. Melba was waiting for us, punctual to the minute as usual, well-dressed, and fresh as the morning. By the way, she could never understand that "dinner at eight" meant anything up to a quarter to nine, so people who knew her well used to ask her half an hour later than their other guests. Bernhardt, however, was no slave to the clock, and when we arrived at the hotel she wasn't up, having probably forgotten all about the appointment. We waited about twenty minutes and in she came, wearing a greasy old dressing-gown and slippers down at heel. Her grey hair was straggling in wisps from some sort of lace head-covering, and her face bore traces of last night's "make-up." But we forgot everything when she began to speak. How wonderful it was to hear those two voices

together, “*La voix d’argent*” et “*La voix d’or*”! One would give anything for a gramophone record of that performance, but gramophones were then—1904—in their infancy. Bemberg’s music, though not great music, exactly caught the feeling of the poem, not a great poem either, but very effective. Here it is:

### LA BALLADE DU DÉSÉSPÉRÉ

Qui frappe à ma porte à cette heure?  
 Ouvre, c’est moi. Quel est ton nom?  
 On n’entre pas dans ma demeure,  
 A minuit, ainsi sans façon!

Ouvre. Ton nom? La neige tombe;  
 Ouvre. Ton nom? Vite, ouvre-moi.  
 Quel est ton nom?—dans sa tombe  
 Un cadavre n’a pas plus froid.

J’ai marché toute la journée  
 De l’ouest à l’est, du sud au nord.  
 A l’angle de ta cheminée  
 Laisse-moi m’asseoir. Pas encor.

Quel est ton nom?—je suis la gloire,  
 Je mène à l’immortalité.  
 Passe, fantôme dérisoire!  
 Donne-moi l’hospitalité.

Je suis l’amour et la jeunesse.  
 Ces deux belles moitiés de Dieu.  
 Passe ton chemin! ma maîtresse  
 Depuis longtemps m’a dit adieu.

Je suis l’art et la poésie,  
 On me proscrit; vite, ouvre. Non!  
 Je ne sais plus chanter ma mie,  
 Je ne sais même plus son nom.

Ouvre-moi, je suis la richesse,  
 Et j’ai de l’or, de l’or toujours;  
 Je puis te rendre ta maîtresse.  
 Peux-tu me rendre nos amours?

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Ouvre-moi, je suis la puissance.  
J'ai la pourpre. Vœux superflus!  
Peux-tu me rendre l'existence  
De ceux qui ne reviendront plus?

Si tu ne veux ouvrir ta porte  
Qu'au voyageur qui dit son nom;  
Je suis la Mort! ouvre; j'apporte  
Pour tous les maux la guérison.

Tu peux entendre à ma ceinture  
Sonner les clefs des noirs caveaux;  
J'abriterai ta sépulture  
De l'insulte des animaux.

Entre chez moi, maigre étrangère  
Et pardonne à ma pauvreté.  
C'est le foyer de la misère  
Qui t'offre l'hospitalité.

Entre, je suis las de la vie,  
Qui pour moi n'a plus d'avenir:  
J'avais depuis longtemps l'envie,  
Non le courage de mourir.

Entre sous mon toit, bois et mange,  
Dors, et quand tu t'éveilleras,  
Pour payer ton écot, cher ange,  
Dans tes bras tu m'emporteras.

Je t'attendais, je veux te suivre,  
Où tu m'emmèneras—j'irai;  
Mais laisse mon pauvre chien vivre  
Pour que je puisse être pleuré.

The audiences at these parties were not always highly musical. I once said to a certain peer who hated music: "If you come here to listen to Melba, why don't you subscribe to the opera? Your brother does, and he is as deaf as a post." "Yes," his lordship answered, "and if I were as deaf as my brother, I, too, would subscribe!"

Melba, contrary to what is sometimes said of her, was neither mean nor avaricious. I remember two

occasions when she refused to accept her fee. One was for a party given by my friend, Mrs. Jefferson, at her lovely house in Berkeley Square. Mrs. Jefferson, who now spends most of her time in the country, was one of the most gracious and delightful personalities of the Edwardian period and a great beauty. Melba had arranged, at her request, to give a programme of Bemberg's songs, which he was to accompany. He had been spending the day on the river and missed his train—there were no motors then—and the accompanist engaged at the last moment was so inefficient that Melba had to give it up as a bad job. She sent back the cheque, and there was quite a little skirmish between the two ladies, who were very good friends, Melba saying that as she had not given the programme she could not take it, and Mrs. Jefferson insisting that Bemberg's non-arrival was not her fault.

The other occasion was at Sir Lionel Phillip's house, when the guests, on arriving, found a small fire had broken out, and made entertaining impossible. I cannot imagine Melba sitting in her dressing-room as did Patti once, refusing to go on until her distracted manager had managed to collect her fee, payable in advance. As he got it gradually together, so she dressed herself, putting on her shoes only when he produced the last hundred pounds. Melba would have given him the devil for having engaged her without sufficient guarantee, but she would have sung and helped him out.

Melba herself was very fond of social life, and entertained a good deal at 30 Great Cumberland Place, which she took from the Hwfa-Williams during one of their recurrent financial crises, and afterwards at Frank Schuster's charming house in that most delightful of streets, Old Queen Street, Westminster. There were no more delightful and hospitable people in London than the Hwfa-Williams. They had been

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very wealthy, but they had spent their money gaily and royally—very much the latter, for they got rid of a fortune in entertaining the Prince of Wales, afterwards King Edward VII. Hwfa-Williams was a great racing man; he founded Sandown races and I believe owned the course. How they betted in that set! Mrs. Hwfa once told me that one of them, a popular racing man and heir to a peerage, would make the most extraordinary wagers. On one occasion, on a wet day after lunch, he and a friend each staked £3,000 on which of two drops of water would first reach the bottom of the window-pane. Mrs. Hwfa had a genius for giving parties and invented the most ingenious excuses for giving one. Her informal lunches and supper-parties were the most amusing in London. She was rather deaf—not so deaf as she pretended, however—and she had a way of mistaking (?) what people said, and making some witty and often rather *risqué* reply in her high, penetrating voice. She had a magpie which she called Melba. One day at a party she said at the top of her voice: “Poor Melba has been terribly sick. I am afraid she has eaten too many mice.” The story was spread round London that Melba had an unnatural passion for eating mice, and that it was ruining her voice. They were always hard up, but it never seemed to make any difference to them, and they were so popular that on two occasions their friends clubbed together in order to pay their debts. The Prince himself suggested the subscription. Needless to say, they celebrated the event each time by giving a big party.

Melba, though not a racing woman and by no means extravagant, got on very well with Mrs. Hwfa, who was one of the few people for whom she would sit down to the piano and sing, when she was entertaining. Truth to tell, she loved the smart world and had a real respect for duchesses, and why not, indeed! A

duchess is not merely a duchess *qua* duchess; she stands for a certain social paradise which will always appeal to women; especially to women not born with the *entrée* to that paradise. If you are naturally sociable, you love society, and if you love society it is surely more intelligent to try for the best available. At all events it gives you value for your money. It has the best houses, gives the pleasantest parties, and has the most agreeable manners. In its circles you meet all the people who have done interesting things: the people who count in politics, diplomacy, art, and literature, and even in these democratic days, it gives you a feeling of ease and well-being that you will seek in vain in the ranks of prosperous commerce, if such a thing still exists. You feel that you are behind the scenes of life, among the people who pull the strings of this complicated puppet show.

Is it snobbish to like these things? Well, then, write me down a snob, for I love all the fleeting joys social life has to offer. I like good restaurants, delicious food, fine wines; I like sitting at tables decorated with flowers and old silver, and being served by deft menservants. I like big houses, fine pictures, and furniture, pleasant odours, well-dressed men, and expensive-looking women. I like going to Covent Garden in the season and sitting in a comfortable stall, visiting my friends in their boxes in the interval, or going to see the singers. I like luxurious cars, and well-found country houses. *Voilà*—my *credo*! And I am not a bit ashamed of it. I know, of course, that the West End I love is but a tiny fraction of London's six hundred and ninety-nine square miles, but it is a very pleasant fraction. I know, too, that those whose fortunate lot enables them to enjoy its attractions, form but a small minority of the population, but then I like minorities. All the things that are best worth having in life, wit, talent, wealth, success, can be counted among them. The sun himself endorses my opinion,

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for though he starts his day's work by rising in the east, he always comes up west for the evening!

Melba, as we have seen, was by no means a Puritan. She liked the admiration of her men friends. One of the most devoted of them was Haddon Chambers, the well-known playwright. For a long time they were inseparable, but alas! his infatuation lasted longer than hers, and she had a lot of trouble in getting rid of him. Another was Bernard Rolt—to whom she left £1,000—an extremely attractive young man who wrote songs of the drawing-room type. They both accompanied Melba, and Lady Stracey, who was then young, and very beautiful, to Venice one summer, and the two ladies had an amusing time playing off one against the other. The object of the trip was to enable Melba to study *Madame Butterfly* with Puccini, who had had her in mind when writing the part of Butterfly. Somehow or other she never took to it. Notwithstanding her musical knowledge, excellent memory, and quick intelligence, she found it extremely difficult. Lady Stracey told me that one day on returning just before lunch to the *palazzo* that they had taken, she just managed to avoid being hit by the score of the opera, which Melba hurled across the room, exclaiming: "Damn the thing; I shall never learn it!" Poor Puccini, who was seated at the piano, kept saying: "*Pazienza, cara signora, pazienza!*"

In 1902 a great event took place at Covent Garden: the *début* of Caruso in *Rigoletto*. The manager was then André Messager, the composer of *Véronique*, one of the most delightful of all light operas. Talking of Messager, when the Carlton opened, Monsieur Ritz, who had known Lady de Grey for many years, asked her if she would help him to make it the fashion, giving her *carte blanche* in the matter of expense. She took the Lyric Theatre for one evening, engaged the whole cast, scenery, and



CARUSO AS CANIO IN "PAGLIACCI"



orchestra of *Véronique* which had been recently produced in Paris, and asked all her friends to hear it, taking them to the Carlton to supper afterwards. An expensive *première*, but it paid Ritz well. London owes a lot to Ritz. He is as worthy of a public monument as is the inventor of bridge, and more so than the worthy Abraham Lincoln, also a foreigner, for he revolutionized London hotels. Before his time the only places where you could get a decent meal were the Savoy and the old Bristol in Cork Street. Most of them had hardly changed since the days of Chaucer. Many of our country hotels are still medieval. Success caused Ritz to lose his balance, and finally his head. He astonished a famous London goldsmith one day by walking into the shop and ordering not only a service of gold plate, but also solid gold floor covering, tables, chairs, and curtains. He died not long afterwards.

Caruso took London by storm. I have never heard a tenor voice of such lovely quality before or since. Like Melba, he was a born singer, and his wonderful breath control enabled him to phrase perfectly. The combination of two such voices as his and Melba's redoubled the popularity of *La Bohème*, which was the second opera in which he appeared. Melba loved singing with him; as she said to me once: "The higher he sings, the more easy it seems to him; in the third act of *Bohème* I always feel as if our two voices had merged into one." I don't think, however, that she liked him much personally. Caruso was a peasant and remained one all his life. He liked the *spaghetti*, the strong red wine, and the unspeakably strong and evil-smelling Tuscan cigars, and, worse still, he shared the love of the Italian peasant for garlic. This, and a fondness for rather coarse practical jokes, did not make him too agreeable a colleague for the elegant Melba, who disliked practical jokes when she herself was the object of them.

At the time of his *début* Caruso's actual technique left a good deal to be desired, but his voice made up for everything. In later years he became a very great artiste, but, alas! as his method improved his voice deteriorated, and he got into the habit of forcing it. You can hear it in his last records. What a cast they got together for *Bohème* in those days! Melba, Fritzi Scheff, Caruso, Gilibert, Scotti, Journet, Dufriche. It would be hard to match it nowadays.

Mademoiselle Fritzi Scheff was—with the exception of Zélie de Lussan—the best Musetta I have ever seen. She was very temperamental. One evening during a performance an entirely unrehearsed incident occurred. Bemberg and I were in Melba's box that evening, and in the second act, just as Fritzi Scheff was carefully preparing to take the high B natural at the end of the *Valse*, a clear, angelic voice in the wings landed on it with effortless ease, and sang the rest of the phrase with her. Everyone whispered: "Melba!" There was a long wait after the curtain fell, and finally the manager, Mr. Neil Forsyth, came in front and announced that as Mademoiselle Fritzi Scheff was indisposed and could not continue to sing, Madame Melba had kindly consented to conclude the performance with the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Bemberg went behind to see what was the matter, and when he returned he told me that Fritzi Scheff had tried to scratch Melba's face, and then had hysterics. It was awkward for the audience, as we were turned out into Covent Garden at ten o'clock, long before the hour for which carriages were ordered and cabs congregated to pick up those who did not possess their own conveyances.

I never met a singer who was so fussy about his health as was Caruso, especially during the latter part of his career. His dressing-room was like a chemist's shop, so full was it of sprays, douches, pastilles, gargles, and throat remedies of every kind.

I don't think he was a particularly happy man, except when enjoying himself in the society of his fellow-countrymen. He had absolutely no leanings towards the fashionable life.

Speaking of Caruso, the *Daily Telegraph* said : " We do not say that Madame Melba, even in her access of fervour, exactly balanced the passionate heat of Caruso, but the pair of singers were on the same level, and that is much. Mr. Caruso and his *bel canto* carried all before him." He goes on to speak of Melba, saying : " Warmth and colour marked her embodiment of the luckless Mimi. We may even say that there was in some measure the rare and precious quality of pathos." She is no longer hailed as a great actress.

Caruso had many amiable qualities, he was generous to a fault, and incapable of snobbishness; snobbishness, indeed, is not an Italian failing. I remember once when I was staying at Sorento at the Hôtel Tramonto, he arrived for a few days' rest. I was talking to him after dinner, when four or five relations, typical Italian working men, came to see him. He excused himself to me, and after embracing them all, took them upstairs to his rooms. I have no doubt they all went away with substantial financial souvenirs of their visit.

He once told me of a curious incident that occurred at Monte Carlo. He was lunching with a party of friends, when one of them said : " Have you all noticed that we are exactly the number of singers needed to form the cast of *Trovatore*, and what is even more remarkable, each part could be perfectly cast? " " *Si non è vero è ben trova-tore!* "

An incident which occurred on the night of his *début* shows how much more formal social life was then than it is now. On entering the Royal Box, King Edward noticed that one of the orchestral players was wearing a black tie. He immediately

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sent an equerry to express his disapproval, and to request that the player should at once change it.

The season of 1902 was a wonderful one for music. From the front page of this same *Daily Telegraph* one notices that among the musical events to be heard in one week were orchestral concerts conducted by Richter and Richard Strauss. Patti, Albani, Julia Ravagli, Blanche Marchesi, and David Bispham were singing; Pugno, Dohnanyi, Bauer, and Sapellnikoff were giving piano recitals, and Kreisler and Kubelik violin recitals.

Melba was not without her enemies. To have won the race, means that you have left your competitors behind, and, oddly enough, they do not like it. Few people, too, can occupy positions of power without giving offence. Though a good-natured woman, Melba did not like any of her decisions being called into question, and neither would she brook the idea of any soprano being engaged who might threaten her supremacy in the slightest degree. She was in a peculiarly favourable position to enforce her will. She was hand in glove with Lady de Grey—Lord de Grey was the chairman of the directors—and between them they practically controlled the capital of the Company, for the ten principal box and shareholders were their intimate friends, and had they withdrawn their money the enterprise would have come to an end. In 1907 Melba was at the height of her power. She was forty-eight years old, but her voice showed not the faintest sign of the passing of the years. "There is not a hole in Nellie's voice," said Bemberg. Her success with the public was as great as ever, and she was on the best of terms with the newly appointed manager, the charming Neil Forsyth, and with that admirable musician, Percy Pitt, who was now musical director.

But Signor Campanini, who, since 1904, had been

the chief Italian conductor at Covent Garden, did not love her. Neither did Bonci, the tenor. Like all Italians, they wanted to make the opera-house an Italian preserve, and resented the fact that for some years not a single Italian *prima donna* had reigned there. Bonci, too, accused her of having been the cause of his not being regularly engaged and of not wishing to sing with him. It was probably true; she admired his voice and his polished singing immensely, but Nature had not been kind to him in the matter of inches, and as an operatic hero he looked rather ridiculous. So the Italians took counsel together to try and find some means of checking Melba's supremacy.

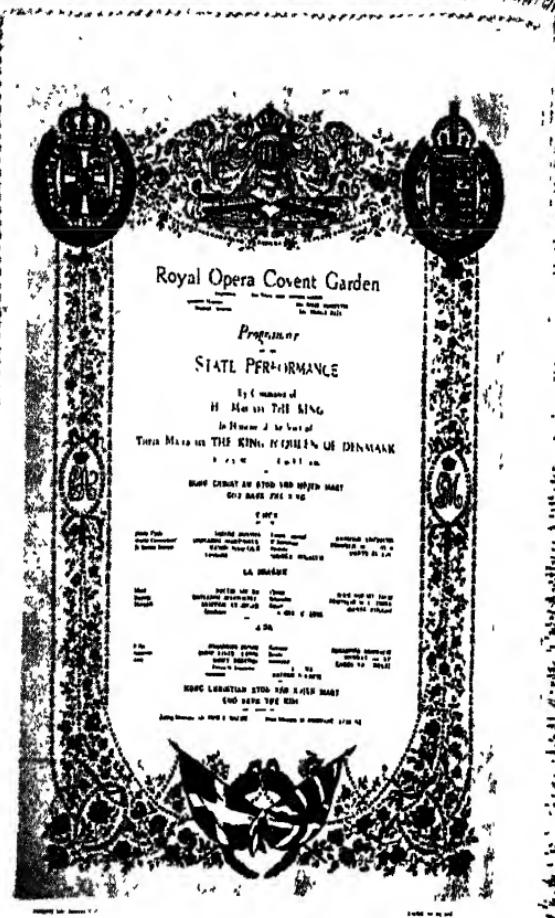
Now it happened that Madame Campanini, who had been a very popular singer in her time, had a sister named Tetrazzini, who, owing to the fact that her sister and brother-in-law reigned supreme in the Italian opera-houses, had been unable to make her career in Italy, and had been singing in South America for twenty-five years with great success. Had it not been for the jealousy of her sister she would undoubtedly have been a famous European star long before. Madame Campanini, having lost her voice, no longer feared her sister's rivalry, so they decided to arrange for her to sing in London. It was, of course, impossible to get her an engagement in the regular summer opera season, but there was no reason why she should not make her *début* in the less important autumn season, which she did, appearing as *Violetta* in November, 1907. She made a sensational success. Her *coloratura* singing was dazzling in its ease and brilliance, she had a pleasing personality, and the opera had been newly dressed in the period of 1850 and produced with great care.

In face of this triumph the Syndicate could not refuse to offer her an engagement for a summer season, and gave her a contract, that of 1909.

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At first her success was triumphant, but as the season wore on people began to see that she was not a Melba. Her voice had not the same thrilling quality, nor had she the same polished method. Towards the middle of the season audiences fell off and the directors went to Melba—who had not accepted a contract that year—and begged her to resume her place. “Very well,” she said, “but as I have not a contract I shall have to charge the same fee that I receive for private engagements—five hundred guineas.” And they had to pay!

Another instance in which Melba was accused of jealousy and unfairness was with regard to a young American singer named Parkinson, which name she changed to Parkina. She was a pupil of Madame Marchesi, who hoped great things from her pleasant, light soprano voice, and sent her to London with letters of introduction to her daughter Blanche, and to Melba. Blanche Marchesi was also enthusiastic about her, and took her to an agent, who arranged for her to sing at a big orchestral concert. Her success was considerable, both with the press and the public, whereupon Melba sent for her, and having heard her, persuaded her to give up thinking of a career on the concert platform and to go in for opera, promising her an engagement. She kept her word, and the girl made her *début* as Siebel, in *Faust*. This was in 1904. She also sang with Melba in Saint-Saëns’ one-act *poème-lyrique*, *Hélène*, which the composer himself conducted—on this occasion the stalls were two and a half guineas—and took the part of Musetta in *La Bohème*. That she did not become a star was no fault of Melba’s; she had not enough personality for the operatic stage, and her voice, though charming, was by no means exceptional either in range or quality. It was another proof of Melba’s lack of judgment with regard to her *protégés*. She made the same mistake about a young Australian contralto, Regina



GALA PROGRAMME OF STATE PERFORMANCE BEFORE  
THE KING AND QUEEN OF DENMARK



Nagel. Parkina subsequently died after a long and painful illness.

The year 1908 was the twentieth anniversary of Melba's *début* at Covent Garden, and to celebrate it a special matinee was given in her honour. The programme consisted of the first act of *Madame Butterfly*, with Destinn as Butterfly, and the first act of *Traviata*, in which she herself sang. The King and Queen were present, and the proceeds of the matinee—£2,000—she generously sent to the London Hospital. She was capable of great generosity in money matters; she could afford to be generous. So could Patti, but . . . ! When Mademoiselle Bauermeister retired from the operatic stage in 1905, after a career of over thirty years, it was Melba who arranged the farewell performance which was given for her, and which brought in nearly £1,500. It was said, by the way, that Mademoiselle Bauermeister knew every rôle backward in every opera in the *répertoire*, and that she could replace any singer, male or female, at a moment's notice. Bauermeister was devoted to Melba, as, indeed, were all the smaller people at Covent Garden. She never hit those who could not hit back, which is an excellent quality, and, be it said, a rare one among opera stars. During all these years she had taken part in every Command or Gala performance, generally as Juliette, Marguerite, or Mimi, in one or two acts from *Traviata*, *Faust*, or *La Bohème*.

The year 1909 saw Melba's fiftieth birthday. She had now realized all her ambition. She was the greatest living *prima donna*; she sat in the seats of the mighty, and the great ones of the earth did her homage; she was rich, and she enjoyed perfect health. Then, too, she was happy in her family relations. Her father was still alive to rejoice in her success, and her beloved George, whose first marriage had turned out very unhappily, was now married to a

charming Australian girl. The family of her late husband had taken her part in all the miserable affair of her early marriage, and his father, Sir Andrew Armstrong, had attended George's first wedding. What more had she to wish for?

But to a Queen of Song the realization of all her ambitions brings only tragedy. She holds the allegiance of her subjects just so long as she can cheat them of a sigh, or charm them to a tear. When her power to do so has waned, they will have no hesitation in deposing her and setting up another in her place. I have known choristers cry hopelessly at the loss of their sweet boyish voices, so think what it must mean to a Melba, when for the first time she is conscious of a sense of effort in singing a cadenza! She tries to think that it is only a temporary fatigue, but in her heart she knows the fatal signs only too well. It is the beginning of the end.

Melba still sang marvellously, not with the effortless ease of former years, but with even greater art. Now, however, the art was apparent; it was no longer the lark singing at heaven's gate. The last years of her glory coincided with the last years of that brilliant social life she had so loved, and with which she had been so closely identified. The days were drawing near when society would be occupied with other things than *prima donnas*.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PATRONAGE IN MUSIC

I HAVE spoken at some length on the subject of Lady de Grey and the little group of leading lights of the social world whose interest in opera kept Covent Garden going. Opera has always been an aristocratic institution, at any rate in London and in New York, where the directors of the Metropolitan Opera House have every year to make up an enormous deficit. But it is not only in opera that patronage plays a leading rôle. It is essential to the very life of all the arts, and it always has been. The people have to be given a lead; they follow gladly enough if the leaders are worthy of their confidence. And although it is they who will eventually make the reputation and fortune of a singer, and decide what pictures, and what music shall live, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they would never have seen the picture, or heard the music, had not the patron loosened his purse-strings and given the painter and the musician a chance to study while their art was as yet immature, and afterwards helped them to make it known.

Not all patrons or would-be patrons of art possess discrimination. Many of them have a genius for backing the wrong horse. I know one very rich man who is constantly discovering a new genius, and to his credit, when his swans turn out to be geese, he is never in the least discouraged, but goes bravely on in his quest of the Holy Grail.

Although there is no doubt that the arts have always flourished more under protection than when they have had to fend for themselves, patronage has its disadvantages, chiefly in the loss of independence suffered by those patronized. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Certainly the social status of music is now very different from what it was in the days when the musicians attached to the Courts of princes and the households of great nobles were ranked with the upper servants, but it is still far from satisfactory, and seeing that music is still regarded socially as the Cinderella of the arts, musicians should at any rate profit as much as possible from those who so regard it.

The heads of the profession in England have most of them acquired some sort of social position, and many of them have been knighted. Great singers, and instrumental *virtuosi* too, are, and always have been, courted and made much of; merely, however, because people have the same feeling towards them that they have for all celebrities; they like to stare at them. But with the rank and file of the musical profession this is by no means the case, and even in these democratic days, they are considered by many as ranking far below the clergy, service men, and the members of the learned professions. Even below politicians! Especially is this so with regard to organists. At a party I went to recently I heard my hostess say to the dowdy wife of a well-known K.C.: “Oh, Lady —, I want you to meet Mrs. —. She is a most charming woman.” The reply was: “The wife of the organist? Oh, no thank you!” I suppose this attitude is in some respects due to the fact that genius is no respecter of persons, and is as likely—indeed, the history of art shows us, more likely—to choose a humble dwelling-place than to seek the palaces of the great. Giotto, Duccio, Botticelli, Rembrandt, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven,

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Wagner, Verdi, to mention only a few names, were all men of the people, and the same may be said of most famous executants.

The very words, "patron," "patronage," are repugnant to some people, but without them medieval art could not have existed. In the Middle Ages the Church was the great patron. It commissioned and preserved for us the exquisite work of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century painters and sculptors; the illuminated missals, carved ivories, and bronzes; Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Later on, during the Renaissance, the arts were enthusiastically encouraged and supported by the Medici family in Florence, the Sforzas in Milan, the Duke of Urbino, and many of the Popes. We owe an immense debt to the Church. It is safe to say that without it there would have been no great art earlier than the sixteenth century.

In England, too, the Church was the patron. We owe to it, and especially to the Chapel Royal, our glorious heritage of Tudor music. Byrd, one of the greatest composers of Church music of all time, was a choir-boy at St. Paul's Cathedral. He subsequently became organist of Lincoln Cathedral. Then, too, he was a *protégé* of the famous courtier, Sir Christopher Hatton. Tallis, Tye, Farrant, and Gibbons all passed most of their lives in the service of the Church, and the great Purcell was a Chapel Royal chorister. He afterwards became organist of Westminster Abbey. It is needless to say that at that period Church patronage meant Court patronage also. There was no such thing as the independent professional musician, owing nothing to one or the other. In France, Lully, whose influence on opera was so profound, owed everything to the protection of Louis XIV.

Music owes an immense debt to the princes and grand dukes who ruled Germany in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries. Most of them included in their households a *Kapelmeister* to supervise the music, and play the organ in their private chapels, and many of them kept private orchestras and string quartettes. Haydn did all his best work at Eisenstadt, in the service of that cultured ruler, Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy. We all know the story of how, when the Prince, owing to heavy losses was obliged to reduce his establishment, and proposed dispensing with his orchestra, Haydn wrote his "Farewell Symphony" in which each player, as his part came to an end, extinguished his candle and left his place, leaving finally only the first violin to conclude the work. This so touched the Prince that he retained the orchestra.

The Prussian Court, under the Elector Frederick, did much for music. Musicians from every country in Europe flocked to Berlin, sure of help and encouragement. The leading musicians from less important courts humbly took their places in the orchestra, or sang in the choir. No composer was ever more highly protected than was Handel. He received three pensions of £200 a year each, one from the English Court, another from Anne of Denmark, and a third from the private purse of Princess Caroline of Prussia. A good many English composers now-a-days would be glad to earn six hundred a year. Had Mozart, and later Schubert, played their cards with the same skill, the world would most certainly have been richer by many a masterpiece. Death would not have claimed them so soon. Wagner sought patronage eagerly, looking upon it as his right, and repaying his patrons with gross ingratitude. And the kindest of his patrons, Liszt, made Weimar a unique musical centre, only because the Court gave him a free hand, and paid the bills. Yes, patronage wisely exercised is life-blood to the arts. It is a pity that we have not some Prince Esterhazy in England.

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Patronage needs the personal touch. There are those who look forward to the days when the State will be all in all, and the lives and work of everyone will be at its disposal. The days when all social distinctions, private fortunes, and inequalities will have been abolished. They seem to imagine that the triumph of the proletariat would inspire the composer to write masterpieces. It would do nothing of the kind. On the contrary, the cold uniformity of life, the fixed living wage, and the certainty that no effort on his part will raise him above his fellows, and give him a larger share of the good things of this life than his neighbours, would kill his ambition and dull his inspiration. Human motives are very mixed. I do not think there is, or ever has been, a composer who would be content with nothing but the satisfaction afforded him by his work. Such simple-minded beings do not exist.

Great works of art are not inspired by facts themselves; only by facts or ideas working on the imagination. Thus, the ideas of the sorrows of Poland caused Chopin—safe in Paris!—to write his Revolutionary Study. Actual experience of revolution drew from Verdi the vulgar banalities of *Ermanni* and *I Lombardi*. No work of any importance was inspired by the French Revolution, and the present *régime* in Russia has not produced a single first-rate, artistic personality.

Opera, of all forms of art, stands most in need of patronage. It is so expensive that first-class—or even second-class—opera could not be given in London were there not wealthy people who are interested enough in it, either from the musical point of view, or from its social aspect, to be prepared to lose considerable sums of money in subsidizing it. It can never be a commercial proposition. Were Covent Garden to be filled from floor to ceiling at cinema prices, it would not pay a tithe of the cost of

one night's performance; so opera-lovers of small means have very good reason to be grateful to the patrons of opera whose means are large.

And patronage causes not only the opera to function. Where would our provincial musical festivals, or schools of music, or big orchestras be without it? None of them, with the exception of the B.B.C., can stand on their own legs. And the B.B.C., which is in a special position, is itself a patron; it subsidizes both the Opera and the Promenade Concerts.

No; the arts cannot exist without patronage. We want more patrons of discrimination, such as Mrs. Samuel Courtauld, and Mrs. Coolidge; not fewer. It is all very well to say that if the public were not given these things they would come to their own aid, and provide them; they wouldn't. They are much too apathetic. I have spoken almost exclusively of music, but the same state of affairs exists with regard to painting.

Some patrons or would-be patrons of art are very amusing. I know a lady who was so anxious to impress her friends with her musical culture that she took lessons in the terms and catchwords used in music and painting; the names of composers and painters, their principal works and so on. Sometimes she got a little mixed, for one evening at a Symphony Concert she asked me if I did not think the *chiaro oscuro* in the wood wind was beautiful. A lady who patronized the Philharmonic Society was once present at a committee meeting to discuss the programmes for the forthcoming season. Someone proposed Brahms' Fourth Symphony, but another member of the committee objected, saying that it had been played rather frequently in London that year. "Well," said the lady, "why don't we do his *Fifth Symphony?*"

## CHAPTER NINE

### MELBA IN ITALY

THE year 1893 was another very important one in Melba's career. She had been before the public for only five years, but she had already made for herself an enviable position on the operatic stage. She had accepted her first contract for the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and so decided that it was now time to make her *début* at *La Scala*, the famous opera-house of Milan.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, opera in Italy was in as decadent a state as it well could be. Public taste was at an appallingly low ebb; the only operas which were really appreciated were the melodramatic and threadbare works of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, and about half a dozen of Verdi's operas. Three or four of Wagner's operas were in the *répertoire*, but they were sung in Italian and were considered rather heavy by the general musical, or rather unmusical, public. Verdi's *Otello* has never been popular with Italians; still less are they capable of understanding his incomparable *Falstaff*, which was produced amid manifestations of the wildest enthusiasm in February, 1893, just a month before Melba made her appearance in Milan. The enthusiasm, however, was a personal tribute to the illustrious composer, who at eighty years old had written this marvellous work; gay with the gaiety of youth, mellow with the experience and wisdom that

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time gives to a great mind, learned as the music of Bach, and light and happy as that of Offenbach.

Although *La Scala* was living on its past reputation, its verdict still had some weight abroad, especially in New York, and every singer who had made a good impression in other countries felt it was his or her duty to appear there.

It is easy to understand the prestige of *La Scala*. Tradition dies hard, especially such an operatic tradition as that of Italy; opera in its modern sense is an Italian invention due to the researches of the *Camerata Fiorentina* under the Comte de' Bardi, in the late sixteenth century. It was developed by Monteverdi of Cremona, a genius too little understood and appreciated. He reformed the orchestra, introducing many new effects, and managed to reconcile the two conflicting forces, harmony and counterpoint. The tradition was worthily carried on in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by such composers as Pergolesi, Salieri, Paisiello, Cimarosa and Cherubini. Rossini had in him the elements of a really great opera writer, but after *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* he became infected with the dry rot which had affected all Italian institutions.

Italy, too, has had a great vocal tradition, and cannot even now believe that it is possible to learn how to sing anywhere else. I wonder, however, if its reputation for producing great singers is not in some respects due to the lack of competition it met with from other countries. In the days when Italian opera dominated Europe, singing was not cultivated to anything like the same extent in Germany and France, apart from the fact that, generally speaking, the French voice is not an agreeable one. Italy still produces by far the best male voices, but how few of the great women singers of the last fifty years have been Italian : we have Melba, Australian; Eames and Nordica, American; Sembrich, Polish; Calvé, French;

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Patti, Spanish; Albani, Canadian; Mary Garden, Scotch; Destinn, Hungarian; to say nothing of the great German singers, Ternina, Gerhardt, Lilli Lehmann, Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schumann, and Freda Leider. Even among male singers, Italy has produced none during the same period—Battistini excepted—whose art could be compared with that of Jean de Reszke, and our own Santley.

Modern Italian singing is, with few exceptions, frankly deplorable. The tenors sacrifice everything to a few high notes to which they hold on, worrying them like a dog does a bone. Their audiences find their supreme artistic delight in listening to such *arias* as *E Lucevan le Stelle* and *Vesti la Giubba*. If the singer manages a choking sob after the highest note, their joy is delirious: “*Come canta bene!*” they cry. In justice to Italian baritones, one must admit that they are almost always more artistic than the tenors. Italian voices are not anaemic; it is amazing what a row they can make when they really let themselves go. There is, however, one element that has always made opera going pleasant in Italy, and that is the fact that all the performers being almost invariably Italian, there is a certain homogeneity often missing even in such opera-houses as Covent Garden, and the Metropolitan, New York, where the cast is frequently cosmopolitan. Another is the general atmosphere of enthusiasm, opera being as natural to an Italian audience as a variety entertainment is to an English audience.

Apropos of Italian male voices, it is difficult to understand the fascination male sopranos have always had for Italians, and not only for Italians, for in the eighteenth century, they were extremely popular in London. Lord Mount-Edgcumbe, in his *Reminiscences*, goes into raptures over Signor Pacchierotti. “The most perfect singer it has ever been my lot to hear,” he says. Pacchierotti’s voice, according to

him, was “an exquisite soprano, full and sweet in the highest degree.” He tells us that he was so much an artiste that he would sing only one *bravura* song—*aria d’agilità*—in each opera, conscious that his supreme excellence lay in expression and exquisite pathos. Such, too, we are told, was his genius in his embellishments and cadenzas that their variety was inexhaustible, and his shake “was the very best that could be heard in every form in which that grace can be executed.” The male soprano has, thank goodness, quite gone out of fashion in most countries. I do not like *Castrati*. When I hear them I always wish that the operation had been even more drastic. Melba did not like them either. As she said, “I like men to be men!”

So to *La Scala* came Melba in March, 1893. The Milanese were quite prepared to hiss her off the stage, and would have loved to do so. In spite of the level to which they had fallen artistically, they had abrogated not one shadow of their pretensions, and to crown all, Patti had sung at *La Scala* in January: Patti, to whom even their own *prima donnas* paid public tribute, and hated like poison in private. In operatic circles war to the knife was declared against Melba. Certain people who pretended they had heard her, predicted for her a sensational fiasco. “She was plain”; “her voice was ordinary”; “she could not sing”; “how dared she attempt *Lucia*? ” were among the pleasant little remarks made about her. So malicious was this opposition that the Italian impresario begged Melba’s agent to give up the idea of singing in Milan, and make her *début* in Venice where they were willing to hear her.

She received letters threatening her with poison, public annoyance, even personal injury if she sang. But she *did* sing—she loved a fight—and she had been wise enough to tackle them on their own battle-

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field, and sing *Lucia*. Needless to say, she won the battle. There were no hostile demonstrations when she entered; the occupants of the stalls and boxes merely turned their backs and pretended, in their polite way, not to notice her. Liszt had experienced it in 1838. But she had not sung a quarter through the Mad Scene before she had them in the hollow of her hand. They could not resist that magic voice warbling with such consummate ease the gymnastics which to them spelt high art. The evening ended as Melba nights were wont to end.

That—before it was muzzled by Mussolini—an admirable newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*, gave her her due, saying :

“ It was a true and genuine success. Who expected it? No one, or almost no one. The public this year is not in an optimistic mood. To nibble now and then at a bit of soprano, to take a mouthful of tenor, is its regular function—in Lent almost a first necessity. The betting might have been ten to one that almost all the spectators went to *La Scala* last evening with a certain fear, mingled with ill-concealed flattery, that they were about to mingle in the holocaust of the diva Melba, the complete annihilation of *Lucia*, the said annihilation to terminate with the sanguinary sacrifice of the diva herself. When, at the end of the first act, the public realized that its glowing anticipations had melted away in the warm light of reality, it seemed as stupid as an elephant before a corkscrew. I must confess that with great equanimity it allowed its ear to be well pulled before it changed this anything but benevolent mood with which it had entered the theatre into vociferous and continuous applause.

Madame Melba won a great battle yesterday. Many are the stars who have fallen on the stage of *La Scala*, and how much greater was the fame which

preceded them, how much more were we led to expect from them! ”

The critic goes on to say that although “ comparisons are odious ” the standard by which they were accustomed to judge sopranos was Patti, and that he derived the same pleasure from Melba’s singing as from that of Patti in her great days. “ For marvellous facility of production, for seduction of *timbre*, for spontaneity of vocalization, for the finished art of modulation, for pureness of intonation,” he says, “ who else now, may we ask, can sing like Melba? ”

During her visit to Milan she made the acquaintance of Verdi, who was very kind to her and helped her to study Desdemona, to my mind one of her very best rôles. She also met Leoncavallo, who begged her to sing in his new opera, *Pagliacci*. She consented, and created the part of the following year at Covent Garden. It was never, however, one of her favourite parts.

From the beginning of the present century opera improved greatly in Italy until the Fascist *régime* took root. Toscanini took *La Scala* in hand, and improved it beyond all recognition, and his influence spread all over the country. The debt music in Italy owes to him is incalculable. It is to him that is due the enormous improvement in the standard of orchestral playing; through him that the operas of Wagner are now known and appreciated in all the big cities, and it is largely due to him that orchestral and chamber music concerts are becoming popular. And the unspeakable Fascists reward him with insults because he very rightly refused, at a serious concert, to conduct their silly and vulgar *Giovinezza*, which they yell at the tops of their voices on every possible and impossible occasion.

The Fascist *régime* has had an extremely bad

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effect on opera; the authorities are now so patriotic that they do not welcome the works of non-Italian composers, and indeed they cannot afford to produce them, as their bullying methods have frightened away the tourist on whom they depended for a considerable part of their revenue. It is deplorable to see how little Italian children are being encouraged to become braggarts and bullies. "Let us invent terrible arms of destruction and death," said Signor Turati when distributing arms to boys. If you do not take off your hat when the little devils begin bawling *Giovinezza*, you will get it roughly knocked off for you. They add pretty little verses to this charming song of youth. Here is one of them: I have heard it yelled by children of under fourteen:

"*Contro Parigi, noi marceremo,*  
*E vittoriosi ritorneremo:*  
*Al nostro Duce, riporteremo,*  
*La mozza testa della maryanna.*"

which, being translated, signifies: "We will march to Paris and return victorious, bringing to *Il Duce* (Mussolini) the bloody severed head of France." Another graceful effort tells us how Italy is surrounded by enemies, and that one by one she will massacre them all. Such an atmosphere is, of course, fatal to the peaceful cultivation of the arts. The truth is that Italy is frantically jealous of France: of its rich soil; its democratic institutions; its *bien être*; in a word, of its civilization.

Melba's triumph at *La Scala* naturally made all the other large towns desirous of hearing her. She sang at Turin, Genoa, Florence, and Rome, and always with enormous success. She had sung at Palermo in the spring of the previous year. The opera-house there is one of the largest in the world, larger by, I believe, a foot all round than the famous Paris opera. She had an amusing experience at Palermo. After a very rough crossing—and the

Mediterranean can be rough; the worst tossing I ever had was going from Naples to Palermo—she was resting in her room, and was kept awake by someone who was playing very beautifully the *Serenata* of Braga on the violoncello. She sat up in bed and joined in. The music stopped. “*Chi è là?*” called out an old but gay voice. “*Chi è là?*” she repeated. “*Sono Braga*” (I am Braga). “*Sono Melba*” (I am Melba).

From Palermo she went on to Nice. She had £200 in the bank and no prospect of an immediate engagement, so learning that Grau, the impresario, was holiday-making there, she determined to bluff and put up at the most expensive hotel. He came to see her and asked: “Would you care to sing here this season?” She said yes, but that she supposed that all the singers were already engaged. “Oh,” he said, “I can manage it. I can get you four thousand francs a night.” She answered that she couldn’t think of singing for less than five thousand. And she got it. After she became famous she sang very little in the Continental opera-houses. They could not afford to pay her fees. The fatigue of travelling and the strain of singing are just as great if you are paid one hundred guineas as they are if you get five hundred, but in every place she *did* sing—Germany, Austria, Belgium, Holland, Sweden—it was the same story of crowded houses, wild enthusiasm, and Royal favours. In Germany that great musician, artist, soldier, sailor, statesman, and critic, the ex-Emperor Wilhelm, sent for her to his box, and kindly offered some criticisms of the performance. She was not Melba for nothing! She told him that she would not dream of criticizing his system of government, and she would thank him to let her know best how to sing. She formed the impression that he was a clever and a conceited ass.

One of her greatest triumphs was in St. Petersburg in 1891. She, with Jean and Edouard de Reszke,

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were invited to sing before the Emperor Alexander III. His Majesty had expressed a wish to hear them in *Romeo et Juliette*, but there arose a difficulty. It was a tradition that no language but Russian must be used in the Court Opera House, and, of course, none of them knew a word of it. However, after a good deal of correspondence, they were permitted to sing in French. They were royally entertained and loaded with valuable presents. The Grand Duke Alexis, the Emperor's eldest brother, gave a big dinner in their honour, and on entering a magnificent room, they were conducted to an immense buffet covered with dishes of *hors-d'œuvres*. Not knowing the Russian customs, Melba made a hearty meal, though rather surprised that they should dine standing up. To her great surprise the great doors leading to another magnificent room were flung open, a table glittering with gold plate was revealed and dinner was announced! She managed to make another meal, and, like everyone else, was amazed at the Russian appetite. Chaliapine once told a friend that he could not understand how the English could live as they ate so little, and that he hated dining out in London for that reason. Melba was struck by the terrible sadness of the snow-covered Russian landscape. What must it be now that Russia has relapsed into barbarism, and there are no longer any kindly and civilized people to atone to some extent for the cruelty of Nature?

She was immensely struck with the Russian ballet, but on her return no one believed her when she described its gorgeous beauty. It remained for Sir Thomas Beecham to introduce it to us some twenty-two years later. She had the pleasure of meeting Rubinstein, then near his end. He wrote to her, saying :

“ DEAR MADAME,—I am old, ill, and dare not venture out into the chill winds. But I feel, though

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it seems presumption as I write it, that I cannot let you leave St. Petersburg without asking if you would pay a great honour to an old man. Can you come for a few minutes to sing me just one song?

“ANTON RUBINSTEIN.”

Melba, of course, went, and they made music together for hours. He played her a concerto of Liszt's with all his old fire and genius.

## CHAPTER TEN

### MELBA IN AMERICA

IN 1893 Melba's now established fame in London resulted in an engagement to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. At that time no singer who had not already made a success at Covent Garden could obtain an engagement there; and one witnessed the curious anomaly of American artistes of the first rank, such as Lilian Nordica, Emma Eames, and David Bispham—all, of course, trained in Europe—making their New York *débuts* via the European opera-houses and Covent Garden. Things have changed now, especially since the war, and Mary Garden, Geraldine Farrar, Galli-Curci, Rosa Ponselle, Jascha Heifetz, and Horowitz have all been famous in America before appearing in London. London, however, has sometimes a way of reversing the verdict of New York with disastrous results to the popularity and earnings of the artiste in question after he or she returns to the United States. It did so in the case of Galli-Curci and Heifetz.

Galli-Curci came here purely on a gramophone reputation, a very unsafe method of judging a singer, for no record is released until it is perfect, no matter how many times it has to be made. Sometimes it happens that everything combines to produce a perfect record : the singer is in unusually good voice, the acoustics are favourable, the accompanist at his

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best. It was so when Galli-Curci made her famous record of *Ah! fors è lui*, from *La Traviata*. She has never, at any rate in England, sung so well. Heifetz, on the contrary, is as technically perfect as are his records, but one gets tired of perpetual perfection and nothing else. To me he is "faultily faultless, icily null."

New York has always been the Mecca of the most highly paid singers in the world, for the "main and simple reason," as Booth Tarkington's delightful Penrod said, that it pays them highly, and so for Melba began that extremely desirable see-saw between London and New York. Even the *sea* part of it not being unpleasant, as operatic stars always insist on the most expensive state-rooms on the most expensive boats, in addition to their largely increased fees.

The official languages of the Metropolitan at that time were Italian and French, but most of the operas given were French and German. At the performances, the chorus sang always in Italian, and the principals in whatever language that happened to suit them. I myself have heard Faust sing to Marguerite:

" *Dammi ancor, dammi ancor,*"

to which the simple German village maiden replied in French. A striking tribute to the level of education in Germany in the time of Goethe!

The Company which Melba joined was a very distinguished one. It included Emma Eames, Emma Calvé, Lilian Nordica, Sigrid Arnoldson, Scalchi, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, de Lucia, Ancona, and Pol Plançon. She made her *début* in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, the same opera in which she had first appeared in London five years previously. Between that time and her coming to New York she had charmed Paris with her exquisite singing in *Romeo et Juliette* and *Faust*, in company with the de Reszke

brothers, and the great French baritone, Lassalle. Both of these operas she had rehearsed carefully with Gounod himself, who had a great admiration for her. He wrote on a photograph which he gave her: "*À la chère Juliette que j'ai espéré: à Nellie Melba.*" It was a mutual admiration society, for she wrote about him: "I thank God for having met and known Gounod. He awakened in me my artistic sense. He was so broad, so human, and had so much to give."

Her *répertoire* at this time was not large, but in it she was already unique, both for the quality of her voice and of her art. Her success in her first season was not overwhelming, partly owing to the immense popularity of Madame Eames. Society adored her, and the de Reszke brothers, and as one of the best New York critics, Mr. Krehbiel, said, had found all the artistic bliss which it was capable of assimilating in listening to their combined voices in *Faust*. So popular indeed was Gounod's opera that another critic had sarcastically christened the Metropolitan Opera House "*Das Faustspielhaus,*" in parody of the Wagnerian Holy of Holies at Bayreuth. Then, too, Calvé as Carmen was one of the most sensational successes on record. It is said that the twelve performances of *Carmen* brought at least £20,000 into the coffers of the Metropolitan that season. Melba and Calvé professed the greatest enthusiasm for each other's singing. "*Comme un ange vous chantez avec votre voix divine,*" said Calvé, and Melba replied in a suitable phrase. But in private they dissembled their love.

Certainly the Metropolitan engaged the pick of the world's singers. The cast of *The Magic Flute*, which I reproduce on page 130, would now-a-days be difficult to equal and impossible to surpass, but all the critics, however, agreed that since the best days of Patti, there had been heard no such singing in New York as that of Melba. She had been singing in opera only for five

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years, but her technique was already flawless, and her tone production quite as perfect and far more natural than that of Patti, with whom art had long become artifice. As Mr. Krehbiel said : " She moved with the greatest ease in regions which her rivals carefully avoided."

Melba was not in the least discouraged at not taking New York by storm immediately. She said : " If they are talking about Madame Eames now, it will be Madame Melba before long." Of course she was at once received by the Four Hundred, at that time all powerful in New York. Her social prestige in London was well known, and an intimate friend of the Prince of Wales, and a member of the smartest set in London was good enough for even the far less democratic society ruled over by old Mrs. Astor ! As a matter of fact, though English people laugh at what they are apt to call the airs and graces of some of the New York women, and even more at the Bostonian, American society dare not be in the least promiscuous. Money is such a commonplace in the United States that if the few old families left opened their doors to all the aspirants to social favour, they would soon be swamped by Jews and Western millionaires. The process is making rapid headway. " The Golden Horseshoe " at the Metropolitan has long been invaded by *La Haute Juiverie*, and a well-known New York woman said to me last year : " There are only three hostesses left in New York now. I am one of them."

At the time of which I am speaking, however, the disintegration had not yet set in, and the snobbishness of the leaders of the social world caused great heart-burnings. I have related elsewhere<sup>1</sup> how I once dined with one of them and accompanied her to the opera, and how I was taken to task for leaning over and

<sup>1</sup> *I Hope They Won't Mind* (Nash & Grayson).

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speaking to a very charming Jewish lady in the next box with whom I had dined on the previous evening.

If Melba did not have an unqualified success at the opera, she made up for it at the Sunday evening concerts at the Opera House, which, before her engagement, had been doing very badly. She had not been singing at them long before they were crowded out. It was at these concerts undoubtedly that she won the general public. Her prediction regarding her future position was soon justified, for within three or four years she had become an established favourite, and one of the best financial cards the management held.

It is a curious thing that during the early years of her career she had a desire to distinguish herself as a Wagnerian singer. She had sung in *Lohengrin* in London in 1890, with only moderate success, and in 1894 she sang both in *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* at the Metropolitan. Perhaps no singer was ever less fitted by Nature to sing Wagner's music. There is nothing, of course, in the rôles of either Elsa or Elizabeth which does not lie within the voice of any good lyric soprano, but they demand a voice of heavier texture than was Melba's voice. Again, even Wagner's early music is essentially Teutonic, and loses enormously if not sung in German, a language with which she was not acquainted, so she sang Elsa in French, and Elizabeth in Italian! To get inside any rôle a singer *must* understand the language in which it is written, and study it in that language. The psychology of words, or rather the meaning which words convey, varies greatly according to the language in which one is speaking. The same sentence spoken in one language can produce a totally different effect when spoken in another. Take, for instance, the words in the Authorized Version of the Bible: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." In the Douai translation used in

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France they read: “*Jeune homme rejouis-toi dans ta Jeunesse!*” There is all the difference in the world. The same thing, of course, applies to translations of opera libretti. I once heard *Carmen* in German. It was like a tough *soufflé*.

Melba’s Wagnerian ambitions were to cost her dear. Fired by Jean de Reszke’s enthusiasm for *The Ring*, and his—in all probability—joking remark that she would make the ideal Brünnhilde, she determined to appear in *Siegfried*. This was in the season 1896-7, when she had become as great a star in New York as she was in London, and was able to dictate both her terms and the operas in which she chose to sing. So she reserved for herself the exclusive right to the part of Brünnhilde in *Siegfried*. It was a fatal mistake. She had neither the temperament nor the type of voice called for; the music did not lie within her voice, and she was not of the heroic mould necessary to give a convincing portrayal of that formidable damsels. One of the leading critics wrote of her performance:

“ That the music wearied her was painfully evident long before the end of the one scene in which Brünnhilde takes part in *Siegfried*. Never did her voice have the lovely quality which had always characterized in the music of Donizetti and Gounod. It lost in euphony in the broadly sustained and sweeping phrases of Wagner, and the difference in power and expressiveness between its higher and lower registers was made pitifully obvious. The music, moreover, exhausted her. She plunged into her apostrophe with most self-sacrificing vigour at the beginning of the scene, and was prodigal in the use of her voice in the early moments, but when the culmination of its passion was reached, in what would be called the *stretto* of the piece in the old nomenclature, she could not respond to the increased

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demands. It was an anti-climax. Wagner's music is like jealousy; it makes the meat it feeds on if one be but filled with its dramatic fervour. . . . 'There is one glory of the sun, and another of the moon, and another glory of the stars, for one star differeth from another star in glory.' Madame Melba should have been contented with her own particular glory."

Melba was fully aware of the mistake she had made and as frankly acknowledged it. At the end of the performance she sent for the manager and said : " Tell the critics that I am never going to do that again. It is beyond me. I have been a fool." One of them came up to her a few days later and said : " You were quite right, Madame Melba, to make that decision. Your voice is like a piece of Dresden china. Please, please don't smash it." Madame Marchesi, to whom she had mentioned her wish to sing Brünnhilde, had lifted up her hands in horror at the idea. Well, she had had her lesson, and she never made the same mistake twice.

This ill-starred effort so injured her voice that she had to give up singing for the remainder of the season, and take a prolonged rest in order to restore it. This was the last occasion on which she attempted to sing in a Wagner opera.

Apart from the injury to her voice, there had been an unpleasant incident connected with her Brünnhilde adventure. Lilian Nordica, to whom the rôle of Brünnhilde—in which she was superb—would have naturally fallen had not Melba reserved it for herself, spread a story that it was owing to the intrigues of Melba and Jean de Reszke that she was not engaged that season. It was manifestly absurd, and she had the grace subsequently to acknowledge that she had been misinformed as to the facts in the case.

Melba just missed a very disagreeable experience on one of her visits to Chicago. She had always



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occupied the same suite in the hotel which was known as the "Melba Suite," but on this occasion it was not possible to give it to her as the lady occupying it declined to vacate it. An hour or two after her arrival two gentlemanly men walked upstairs, knocked at the door and, without waiting for a reply, entered, and, pointing a revolver at the lady in occupation, demanded her money and her jewels. On her swearing that she did not possess any, they gagged and bound her and ransacked the room. Some time later the chambermaid, on entering, found the poor woman in an exhausted state. Melba was very kind and sympathetic to the victim of the attempted robbery. During her concert tours she travelled in great comfort, having a special Pullman car with conductor, porter, chef, and waiter: the two latter were so capable that she called them "Jean" and "Edouard" out of compliment to her two famous colleagues at the opera.

She was much amused at the familiarity of the negro servants on the trains. One evening when she was travelling back to New York after singing at Philadelphia, the porter in charge of the sleeping-car said to her: "Say, Mrs. Melba, you don't remember me, but you bet I know you—a whiles back you travelled with me and I told you that I thought Mr. Plankon (Plançon) fine, but I didn't think there was much to your Margaret. Yes, ma'am. But I take it all back now for I saw you the other night in *Manon*, and your singing beat the band. Yes, ma'am, you take it from me!" She told a story of another negro, a cabman whom she hired. His face seemed familiar to her and she said: "Are you the man who drove me last night?" "No, Madame," he replied, with a courtly bow, "I am not the gentleman!" It is not only negroes who are blest with that sense of personal dignity. I recently went into a barber's shop in South Kensington to have my hair cut. The

establishment also undertook to do "Permanent Waving." I asked the haughty lady who presided at the desk where I should find the men's room. She fixed me with a stony gaze and said: "The gentleman what cuts men's hair is out." On my asking if the noble earl, his second in command, could not attend to me, she gave me a look of positive dislike.

As in London, *La Bohème*, with Melba and Caruso, was the most paying opera in the *répertoire* of the Metropolitan. Speaking of Caruso, it is not generally known that he availed himself largely of the services of the *claque*. It is difficult to believe it of so famous and enormously popular a singer, but the fact remains that he never dreamed of making an entrance unless he was sure that scattered about in various parts of the house were little groups of men to applaud him and to cry, "*Bravo! Bravo!*" at the right moment. An article I recently read in an American magazine explained his method. He was, it appears, in the habit of purchasing two hundred dollars worth of seats for evening performances in which he took part. These he distributed through one of his retainers, to friends and compatriots, and he always personally inspected the house when buying to see that they were properly placed. He said that applause at the moment when he felt in need of it steadied his nerves, and enabled him to do his best even though he was aware that it was paid for.

It is a curious custom, that of the *claque*. The Oxford dictionary defines the word as "a body of hired applauders," and it is obviously derived from the French word "*cliquer*." It had its origin in France, but became acclimatized in Germany, Italy, and the United States, where it still lingers on, though gradually dying out in other countries. Melba later in her career was once visited by an old and apparently unsuccessful "*claque* master," who offered to make her famous for fifty dollars! She

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declined his services, saying that if she were not already famous she never would be.

I, personally, understand and sympathize with Caruso. There is nothing so heartening to an artiste as applause, and people, especially the occupants of the stalls and boxes, are always lazy and applaud very little unless they are more than ordinarily moved. Such bought enthusiasm cannot eventually affect the position of a great singer one way or another, but it can do much to help on a good one who is not yet an established favourite. And if it is given to an obviously second-rate singer, people only laugh and say: "His friends were very kind to him!" About a hundred of these paid enthusiasts are engaged for any special occasion.

Melba, however, never suffered from lack of applause, and not being of a nervous temperament, she did not feel the need for encouragement. She had indeed that magnetism, which is the most valuable gift the gods can bestow on an artiste. One compliment she received particularly delighted her. She was once called "Melba, that divine boy!" Another tribute she valued very much was that of Philip Hale, Boston, 1907:

"There is still no voice like unto that of Madame Melba, and no one of her sisters on the operatic or concert stage uses voice with the like spontaneity and ease. Thirteen years have gone by since she first gave delight to this city, but charmed and applauding time has constantly enriched her. When she first visited us, her reputation was that of a brilliant *coloratura* singer, with a voice of unsurpassable beauty. Impersonating Mimi eight years ago, she showed that she was more than a singer of dazzling *bravura*. Her tones had a warmth, a sensuous quality, that some had denied her. Those who were so fortunate as to hear her memorable performance of

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Marguerite's music in 'The Damnation of Faust,' at a Cecilia concert a few years ago, were struck by the richness of her middle and lower tones, which were in themselves expressions of womanly and tender emotions.

"To-day this voice is still brilliant in florid passages; it still has the freshness, the 'girlish quality,' that has always characterized it, and set it apart from those of other singing women; but it now has a fullness, a richness, and a sumptuousness that are incomparably beautiful. The voice of Madame Melba would work a wondrous spell even if the artistry of the singer were not uncommon, thrice admirable. And perhaps the most striking characteristic of this voice as it is to-day is its impersonal nature. It is not so much the voice of a perfect singer as it is the ideal voice of song. The hearer revels in the tonal beauty. The tones themselves are charged with emotions of which, perhaps, the singer is not always conscious. The voice is like that of the hermit thrush apostrophized by Whitman:

" 'O liquid and free and tender!  
O wild and loose to my soul!  
O wondrous singer! '"

Melba, on her tours, was always accompanied by other artistes. Had she given song recitals, like Sembrich, Gadsky, Nordica, Bonci, and many other popular favourites, she might have made a great deal more money, but with her usual good sense, and knowledge of her own limitations—which failed her on one occasion only, the Wagner fiasco of which I have already spoken—she realized that her talent was not in the interpretation of great song literature. But to hear that magic voice in "Lo! Here the Gentle Lark" to the flute accompaniment of that admirable flautist, John Lemmone, was worth a good many German *lieder* sung by a lesser singer. It was the

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sheer beauty of sound. She made one think of Housman's lines:

"Here of a Sunday morning my love and I would lie,  
And see the coloured counties, and hear the larks so  
high  
Above us in the sky."

One frequently thinks of great artistes in connection with certain hours, conditions, or emotions. To me, Calvé always suggested a hot southern night; Paderewski gives me a feeling of tension and unrest, and Jascha Heifetz makes me think of machinery. Melba I associate with a spring morning.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### MELBA AND HAMMERSTEIN

ONE of the most interesting and aggressive personalities in the American theatrical world in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth was Oscar Hammerstein. He had much in common with our own Sir Augustus Harris. Both were Jews, both possessed of indomitable courage, energy, and "bounce"; and both had that inexplicable form of insanity, the desire to run opera. His name will be recalled by Londoners in connection with the ill-fated London Opera House—now a picture theatre—which he built with the intention of entering into competition with Covent Garden. He found, however, that the Covent Garden Syndicate had the monopoly, both of most of the operas he wanted to produce, and the singers he wanted to engage; and the two young singers he brought over, Miss Felice Lyne, a rather brilliant soprano with a phenomenally high voice, and a tenor named Orville Harold, both fell flat. During his one and only season he produced two novelties, an opera by Joseph Holbrooke, and Massenet's sugary and second-rate *Don Quichotte*. He was not the first impresario to discover how difficult it is to *épater* London.

In 1905 he was busy supervising the construction of a large theatre, and in the spring of the following year he announced that it would be his own exclusive property and under his own management, and that it

was to be called the Manhattan Opera House. It was not his first operatic venture. Some thirteen years earlier he had built a theatre in the same locality, and started a season of grand opera which only lasted a fortnight, and before that he had given a season of German opera, and been the first to produce *Cavalleria Rusticana* in America (in English).

To attempt to enter into rivalry with the Metropolitan Opera House, seemed on the face of it as dangerous an enterprise as that of challenging Covent Garden. For many years the Metropolitan had stood for opera in New York. It had given every successful new work, had engaged, regardless of cost, all the greatest singers and conductors in the world, and it was firmly rooted as a social institution. Hammerstein, however, was convinced that there was room in New York for two opera-houses, and that there were enough people who wanted to go to the opera in New York who could not afford the subscription prices of the Metropolitan. To some extent he proved to be right, for although on many occasions the fashionable world crowded his theatre, the ordinary Manhattan audience was an entirely distinctive one. The trouble was that there are not enough popular operas and great singers to keep two large opera-houses going at the same time. He went to Europe to engage his artistes, and came back announcing that he had secured Jean and Edouard de Reszke. Nobody believed him, besides which it appeared impossible that the theatre would be ready by the opening night. As a matter of fact it was not ready, and he was obliged to postpone his opening.

Everyone prophesied failure. He had not a single novelty in his list of operas and—at the beginning of the season—not a single great draw among his singers with the exception of Bonci. They were all admirable artistes. There was Madame Donalda, the Canadian soprano, afterwards very popular in London;

Dalmor  s, a very good French tenor, also well known at Covent Garden; Gilibert, and that magnificent baritone, Maurice Renaud. But Hammerstein had been able to infect his whole company with his own enthusiasm, and in Signor Cleofonte Campanini he had a conductor whose devotion and energy fired everyone, principals, chorus, orchestra, down to the youngest programme boy, to do his very best. And they were all dying to do better than the Metropolitan. On one occasion *Aida* was being performed at both houses. News was brought that while the Manhattan was crowded out the Metropolitan was half empty. The curtain was down at the time, and the performers on the stage, led by the conductor, formed a ring and danced a dance of triumph.

But enthusiasm is not enough to bring success to an opera-house, and the fact remained that the Metropolitan was not only supported by most of the millionaires: it had the monopoly of many of the most popular operas and nearly all the most famous singers, and while the acoustics of the new theatre were infinitely superior to those of the Metropolitan, it was greatly inferior in the details which make opera fashionable entertainment. Such a detail as acoustics, of course, matters only to that unimportant person, the lover of music!

The receipts fell and fell and fell. One evening they hardly exceeded a thousand dollars, but Hammerstein was not too cast down. On his visit to Europe he had secured two of the great Metropolitan stars, Calv   and Melba. The way in which he persuaded Melba to sing for him was extraordinarily characteristic of the man. Let Melba tell it in her own words:

“I had now been working continuously for nearly twenty years—I am taking the reader with me (towards the end of 1906)—and I thought that unless

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I soon had a little peace and quiet I should be worn out. It was only too probable that if I had stopped working for a few months, I should very soon have been chafing with restless energy to be at it again. But the fact remains that when I went to Paris in 1906 for the autumn season, I had made up my mind that I would not visit America for at least a year, and that I would cut down my work in Europe to a minimum.

"And yet, in December, I was to find myself engaged in the biggest operatic battle that America has ever known, and not only engaged in it, but loving it. What was the explanation of the change? The explanation was the dogged determination of that most American of Americans, Mr. Oscar Hammerstein—the only man who ever made me change my mind.

"One day, when I was in my flat in Paris, thinking what fun I was going to have in my coming season, Mr. Hammerstein called. I had an idea of what he wanted, and I wouldn't see him.

"Hammerstein went straight off to Mr. Maurice Grau, who, sad to say, was very ill at the time, and persuaded him to give him a letter to me. In view of the letter, I felt obliged to give him an appointment. But I kept on saying to myself: 'I'm not going to America. I'm not going to America.'

"When Hammerstein arrived, my first impression was of a determined man of Jewish persuasion, shortish, thin, and dark, with piercing black eyes. He carried a top hat with a very wide brim in his hand, and he addressed me in a strong American accent.

"HAMMERSTEIN: I'm out to do the big thing in opera. I am building the biggest and finest opera-house in the world. And I can't do without you. I'll give you two thousand five hundred a night.

"MYSELF: Not for ten times the money.

"HAMMERSTEIN: And you can sing as many nights as you like.

"MYSELF: Go away.

" Shortly after that Mr. Hammerstein decided on his Napoleonic *coup*: I had just breakfasted and was sitting down, reading *La Figaro*, when he burst into my rooms in a great hurry.

" HAMMERSTEIN : It's all settled. You're to have three thousand dollars a night.

" MYSELF : But I've told you a hundred times——

" HAMMERSTEIN (*interrupting*) : Never mind about that. Three thousand dollars a night, and you open in *Traviata*.

" Here, to my astonishment, he drew from his pocket a bundle of thousand-franc notes and began scattering them over the floor like cards, until the carpet was littered with them. I was so surprised that I could say or do nothing, and before I could call him back, he had swept out of the room, like a whirlwind, crying that he had to catch his train and had not time to wait.

" I picked up the notes, smiling quietly, and found that in all he had strewn my carpet with one hundred thousand francs. To-day it may not sound such a very vast sum, but then it meant £4,000. And even now-a-days one does not go strewing thousands of pounds on people's carpets.

" I took the notes at the earliest possible opportunity to the Rothschild Bank, telling them that they were not mine, and that they must be kept safely until Mr. Hammerstein called for them.

" However, he did not call for them. Instead, he called once again for me, in the early morning.

" MYSELF : In what way do you want me to help you?

" HAMMERSTEIN : I want you to come and sing.

" MYSELF : I'm very sorry, but I have no intention of going to New York next year.

" HAMMERSTEIN : I can't do without you.

" MYSELF : That's a great pity, because I'm not going.

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"HAMMERSTEIN: I shall give you fifteen hundred dollars a night.

"MYSELF: Please don't discuss terms, Mr. Hammerstein, because I assure you that is useless.

"HAMMERSTEIN: Oh, you'll come all right. (*A pause.*) What do you say to two thousand?

"MYSELF: If you offer me twenty thousand I shall still say the same thing.

"HAMMERSTEIN: It'll be the biggest thing you have done yet. Oscar Hammerstein says so.

"MYSELF: And Nellie Melba says 'No.' I have no intention of going. Good morning, Mr. Hammerstein.

"Had anybody else been so importunate, I should probably have been very angry. But there was a naïve determination about Mr. Hammerstein which appealed to my own character. He knew what he wanted, and did not hesitate to say so. We therefore parted good friends, and I regarded the matter as closed.

"Not so Mr. Hammerstein. At intervals of six days during the next month he either called, wrote notes, or telephoned, always prefacing his remarks by 'Now that you have decided to come to America . . .' I merely sat tight and set my lips. On one occasion, I remember, he obtained an entry into my rooms while I was in my bath. Not in the least deterred he came and battered at the door.

"HAMMERSTEIN: Are you coming to America?

"MYSELF (*between splashes*): No!

"HAMMERSTEIN: Well, and so you've made up your mind at last. Didn't Oscar Hammerstein say you would?

"MYSELF: He did, and Oscar Hammerstein was wrong. As I've told you before, I am *not* going to America.

"HAMMERSTEIN: Oh, yes, you are. You've got all my money.

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"**MYSSELF:** The money is in the bank. It has nothing to do with me.

"**HAMMERSTEIN:** Was there ever such a woman? Still you'll come. Mark my words.

"For once, in a way, Mr. Hammerstein was right. I went to America for him, nor did I regret doing so. For not only was I to experience one of the most brilliant epochs in my career, but I was to know the exhilaration of battles, rivalry, difficulties galore. And I love a good fight."

It was not an easy situation for Melba. She had hitherto been identified with the Metropolitan, and the directors were naturally furious with her. On her arrival in New York she was bombarded with reporters. She was asked if she realized that people were saying that she would ruin her American career? How much was Hammerstein paying her? How many times a week was she to sing? In fact, all the usual impertinences peculiar to American reporters.

The excitement on the day of her first appearance was terrific. So great was the demand for seats that extra stalls were arriving in van loads during the rehearsal, which proceeded to an accompaniment of hammers and curses. Hammerstein met her at the stage door in the evening, trembling with emotion. "By Jove!" he said, "the house is sold out. I am going to win through. Come on the stage and listen to them." She did so, and was heartened by that sound so dear to an artiste, the dull roar of conversation which denotes a crowded house. The opera was *Traviata*. As Melba stepped on to the stage she was greeted with a tumult of applause. The evening was one continuous triumph, and she went to her dressing-room through a passage of massed bouquets. She and Hammerstein had won.

Why, after all, had she forsaken the Metropolitan, where she was a star of the first magnitude? It was,

I think, due to that love of domination which was so essential a part of her character. At the Metropolitan she had to sing when and where they wanted her to sing, and in the operas they chose. At the Manhattan she could do exactly as she pleased. She had saved the situation and she knew it, and although she liked to say she was fighting for the freedom of the artiste, what really appealed to her was the opportunity of demonstrating the power of Madame Melba. It was a very real power, as the Metropolitan found to its cost. On the Melba nights at the Manhattan, society practically deserted the older house. Hammerstein even succeeded in giving *La Bohème*, of which the Metropolitan held exclusive rights. How he managed to get the music nobody knew, but get it he did. Rehearsals were held *in camera*, small orchestral parts which were missing were written in, and a first-rate performance was given, in spite of Ricordi, the publisher, who threatened Hammerstein with all the terrors of the law, American law, too, which never lets go until it has extracted by bribery and corruption the last penny from the pockets of its victims.

Hammerstein, like many Jews, had genuine artistic ideals. I shall never forget a performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which I saw at the Manhattan during his second season. He managed to reproduce the curious exotic atmosphere of Maeterlinck's play in a manner that I have never heard approached elsewhere, much less equalled. One seemed to be living in a strange borderland of dreams. Mary Garden was Mélisande and Dalmorés was the Pelléas.

*Pelléas et Mélisande* is to me one of the most fascinating works in the operatic *répertoire*. In some respects it is rather a *poème-lyrique* than an opera, and yet it is essentially a thing of the stage, for in no other opera is music and drama more intimately associated. And of all music ever written

it most supports the theory that musical sounds have their colours. Apropos of *Pelléas*, an illusion to it gave rise to an interesting discussion in which I and some friends took part last autumn.

We—the literary editor of a morning paper, a well-known composer, and myself—were dining one evening at the house of a famous artist who lives in Chelsea. The day had been dreary and sunless, and in the late afternoon a thick mist had drifted in from the river, wrapping London in a pale, damp shroud. I cursed the English climate, but our host said : “ As a matter of fact, I rather like it : it is just like *Pelléas et Mélisande*; sad, grey, and mysterious. Debussy ought to have been an Englishman.”

“ Curious,” said the editor, “ how the music of different composers suggests different colours to me. Whenever I hear Wagner the atmosphere seems to me to be steeped in rich crimson and purple. Voices, too, have colour. Melba’s was like silver.”

“ Purely imagination,” said the composer. “ Musical colour has nothing to do with pictorial colour; that is, the hues seen in Nature. What is meant by it is merely the sound quality or *timbre* of the notes in which the various forms of music are presented, and it depends entirely on the instrument, or combination of instruments used.”

“ But,” the editor asked, “ you must admit one receives impressions of varying degrees of light when listening to music, and where there is light there is colour. Take, for instance, the gloom of the finale to Tschaikovsky’s *Symphonie Pathétique*, or the irresistible brightness and gaiety of the Scherzo in Mendelssohn’s D Minor Trio. Surely they suggest colour : the one, the dark hues of night, and the other the brightness of a spring morning? ”

“ Yes,” replied the composer, “ they suggest *musical colour*, which, as I said before, is quite

distinct from pictorial colour. It is caused by gradations in *quality* and *mass* of sound, while the infinite gradations of the latter are, of course, gradations of light and colour. You must not confuse the two mediums. In sound colour, effects are obtained by the degree of loudness or softness, for no merging of actual tints is possible; the tone of the stringed instrument cannot shade into the tones of the woodwind; clarinet, flute, or oboe, as blue in painting can shade into green."

"I remember," said I, "being invited about thirty years ago to some 'Colour Concerts' at the old St. James's Hall. An orchestra played selections from the classical composers while different colours supposedly suggested by the music were thrown on to a screen. If I remember rightly, Loie Fuller gave some 'colour dances.' It was interesting, but hardly convincing."

"Of course not," the composer remarked, "but all the same musical colour, properly understood, is very real and of the first importance. To appreciate and understand orchestral music properly, you must be able to recognize the *timbre* or colour of all the different instruments. When you can do this you will realize that music has its own colours, and has no need to borrow the hues of Nature. How full of colour in the musical sense is the combination of all the tenor instruments in the second subject of Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas* overture! Listen carefully to a fugal chorus. Let us say, 'And the glory of the Lord' from Handel's *Messiah*, and you will see how different are the vocal *timbres* as each voice enters. Incidentally, only by so doing will you be able to follow and appreciate a fugue."

"You are all very clever," said the editor, "but nothing will convince me that when I hear Debussy's *Nuages* I do not see mentally grey and black clouds shifting fitfully over a sad sunset sky,

or that Ravel's *Jets d'eau* does not bring before my eyes all the iridescent colours of the rainbow."

"Perhaps," suggested our host, "the identification of actual pictorial colour with music is partly subconscious, and due to association. We connect the sound of trumpets with pageantry, scarlet uniforms, and gold lace; and flutes are commonly spoken of as silver toned. The titles of compositions, too, are suggestive as, of course, they are meant to be. They set the imagination to work. For instance, when we read on a programme the title of Strauss's Symphonic Poem, 'Don Quixote,' we at once form a mental picture of the 'Knight of the Rueful Countenance' and his surroundings, and unconsciously try to fit it into the music. I am sure that if *Nuages* were called, for instance, *Chanson Triste*, it would awaken in us quite another train of thought. An unpaid income tax, perhaps, instead of a stormy sunset. Then, too, it makes all the difference in the world to the musical *timbre* if one hears a composition on the orchestra or on the piano."

'Twas throwing words away, for still the editor would have his will, and answered: "My contention is that musical colour has nothing whatever to do with the medium by which the music is presented to us, but is an essential part of the idiosyncrasy of the composer."

"Let's write the names of, say, six composers on four sheets of white paper, and the colour their music suggests to each of us," I proposed.

All agreed except the composer, who declined to compete. "I have dined too well to play children's games," said he, but he graciously consented to set the examination paper.

We chose Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, and Debussy. The artist, after a few minutes' thought, felt obliged to admit that he had no real convictions on the subject, so only the editor

## MELBA AND HAMMERSTEIN

and myself gave in our papers. Here is the result for what it is worth:

	<i>The Editor</i>	<i>Mysel</i> f
Bach . . .	Dark blue.	Golden brown.
Mozart . .	Silver.	Blue and silver.
Beethoven	A combination of rich colours.	Dun, or any boring colour.
Brahms . .	Dun colour.	Like the Fen country, with pools of light here and there.
Wagner . .	Rich crimson and purple.	Scarlet and gold.
Debussy . .	Grey.	Grey.

The artist smiled maliciously, and strolling to the piano began to play the "Song of the Vulgar Boatmen." It was too much for the composer, who held up his hands and cried: "Kamarad, enough, you have convinced me. That damned tune makes me see red!"

"And it gives me the blues," said I.

It remained to our host to turn the conversation into an intelligent channel. "Let's all have a drink," he suggested. But *revenons à notre Melba*.

Her first season in California took place at an unfortunate moment. She arrived at San Francisco at the height of the Spanish-American crisis, just before war was declared, so she could not have chosen a more unsuitable opera with which to open the season than Rossini's very Spanish work *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. There was every chance of it provoking disorder: either a Spanish demonstration in defence of its national ideals—San Francisco was, of course, originally a Spanish settlement, and it was still full of the descendants of those settlers—or an American demonstration against Spain. It was too late to change the opera, so the only thing was to hope for the best.

The theatre was crammed, but instead of the usual enthusiasm there was an air of hostility, and no applause at all. Every moment the atmosphere grew more tense, and Melba felt that a disturbance was bound to break out. It didn't, owing to a sudden happy inspiration that flashed into her brain. Everyone, of course, knows that in the second act Rosina is having a singing lesson, and Rossini, with touching faith in the good taste of *prima donnas*, has left the choice of a song to the discretion of the singer. Melba had been accustomed to sing anything that suited her; sometimes, as she tells us in her *Melodies and Memories*, *Mattinata* or *Still wie die Nacht*—in an eighteenth-century Spanish opera! On this occasion she advanced to the piano and obliged with “The Star Spangled Banner.” All was well. The whole audience rose to its feet and yelled it with her, and she was very much the hero of the occasion.

Another time in San Francisco she again saved the situation by her presence of mind. She was singing the Mad Scene from *Lucia* when she saw flames break out in the gallery. There were cries of “Fire! Fire!” and things looked ugly. She advanced calmly to the footlights and said: “There is no danger whatever, but please go out quietly.” But the Italian conductor had taken fright and was scrambling up from the orchestra on to the stage. “Stay where you are, Bimboni,” she cried. He continued to climb, so with “a mighty hand and stretched-out arm” she gave him a good crack on the head! He dropped back into the orchestra, cursing her vigorously.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE COLORATURA SINGERS AND OPERA COMPOSERS A DIGRESSION

THE public has always loved *coloratura* singers, and will doubtless continue to love them so long as "Jenny Linds" and "Melbas" continue to be born, but there is danger ahead. The public, while worshipping the singer, is getting tired of the song. It takes an enormous and perfectly legitimate delight in hearing a *prima donna* soar to dizzy heights, sing scales and arpeggios with the rapidity and accuracy of a first-class flute-player, and trill like a bird, but it is sick to death of the operas which give her opportunities to display her accomplishments, and unless she is superlatively great—a Melba, in fact—will not go to hear her. And composers for the last sixty or seventy years have refused to write florid soprano music.

Many reasons have been given to account for this state of affairs, one being that the supply of great voices is coming to an end. This is manifestly absurd. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we had only Europe to draw on; now we can tap the whole world for fresh talent, and, by the way, no country is more prolific in beautiful voices than Melba's own country, Australia.

Another reason given is that the art of *bel canto* is dying. If so, it is taking an unconscionably long time to die, for *bel canto* has always been dying.

Haydn, who was born in 1722, wrote: "Singing is almost one of the forgotten arts, and that is why the instruments are allowed to overpower the voices." In Lord Mount-Edgcumbe's *Musical Reminiscences*, which cover the fifty years from 1773 to 1823, Rossini, of all people, is accused of this fault, and his lordship includes Mozart—for whom, however, he acknowledges a profound admiration—in his indictment. In his preface we read: "So great a change has taken place within a few years that I can no longer expect to receive from it (opera) any pleasure approaching to that which I used to experience. The remembrance of the past is, therefore, infinitely more agreeable than the enjoyment of the present, and I derive the highest gratification music can yet afford me from hearing again, or barely recalling to mind, what formerly gave me such unqualified delight." He goes on to say: "As the good singers disappeared, and remained unreplaced, as the style of the compositions changed, and as their execution deviated more and more from what I had been accustomed to in the *golden age* of the opera, my curiosity diminished with my pleasure, and though both have latterly been occasionally revived, yet I never again expect to hear what I have done, or any new music, or any new singers that will make me amends for those which are gone." The lament of old age since the world began.

Liszt, generally so modern in his outlook, complained of the decay in singing, and the famous teacher, Garcia, said in his book on the subject: "Singing is becoming as much a lost art as the manufacture of mandarin china, or the varnish used by the old masters." But then, Garcia was a very old man when he wrote this, and most of the stars he had taught were dead. Now-a-days, fortunately, we have the gramophone to preserve for us the great voices of our own generation, and I am inclined to doubt if any

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of the legendary voices of the past excelled such  
voices as those of Melba or Caruso.

But, although there is no danger of the supply of voices giving out, there is, as I have said, a very real danger of there being nothing for those voices to sing. If the public declines to listen to the old threadbare operas, and the composers decline to write florid music, they will arrive at an *impasse*, as they cannot be expected to cultivate a form of art for which there is no market. The disappearance of florid music from the operatic stage would be a serious blow to the art of singing, for the hard work and strict discipline of the voice, which the proper study of it entails, are invaluable in any kind of music. Listen to the exquisite phrasing and breath control of Melba in the records she made of the last act of *Otello*. There is not a single florid passage, but had she not been a past mistress of *bel canto* in all its aspects, she could never have achieved such perfection in purely lyric music.

Perhaps you will say: "But listen to Lotte Lehmann, Freda Leider, or Elizabeth Schumann. They are not *coloratura* singers, but they *can* sing." Very true, but, believe me, they have studied that branch of singing *au fond*, and, an' they chose, they could distinguish themselves in it. They prefer music in which their great power of interpretation can have full play.

It is curious that composers, in spite of the love of the public for florid music, have ceased writing it. You will not find it in any of the German operas since Wagner. Gounod used it very little, and Bizet not at all. Verdi gave it up entirely in his later period, and it is, of course, anathema to the modern school. What is odd is that none of the second-rate Italian composers, such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano, Ponchielli, Montemezzi, Zandonai, and company have tried it in their eager bids for popularity. Second-rate composers, however, generally imitate the last

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popular idol, and they were probably too busy trying to be Wagners, or Puccinis, just as those of to-day copy the latest fad of Stravinsky, or the prophets of atonality.

Florid music can be very beautiful—Mozart by no means despised it, but in his time *fioratura* was part of the very fabric of the music. Singers put emotional significance into it; it was sung much more slowly and not treated as merely a vehicle for display.

Musical taste changes to a certain extent, and as it changes new singers arrive to meet the style in favour. Whether there is much improvement in taste, at least in the case of opera-goers, is open to question. Let us take the year 1900, and last year, 1930, and see what they were doing at Covent Garden.

1900

<i>Fidelio</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Beethoven
<i>Carmen</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Bizet
<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Donizetti
<i>Faust</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Gounod
<i>Romeo et Juliette</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Gounod
<i>Pagliacci</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Leoncavallo
<i>Cavalleria Rusticana</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Mascagni
<i>Les Huguenots</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Meyerbeer
<i>Don Giovanni</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Mozart
<i>La Bohème</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Puccini
<i>La Tosca</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Puccini
<i>Il Barbiere di Siviglia</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Rossini
<i>Aida</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Rigoletto</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Lohengrin</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Wagner
<i>Die Meistersinger</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Wagner
<i>Tannhäuser</i>	.	.	.	.	.	Wagner

and two cycles of *The Ring* with extra performances of *Siegfried* and *Wälkure*.

Melba was the bright particular star, and other great singers engaged were Ternina, Schumann, Heink, Jean de Reszke, Bonci, and Scotti, while Felix Mottl conducted the Wagner operas.

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1930

<i>Norma</i>	.	.	.	.	Bellini
<i>André Chenier</i>	.	.	.	.	Giordano
<i>Aida</i>	.	.	s	s	Verdi
<i>Otello</i>	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>La Traviata</i>	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Rigoletto</i>	.	.	.	.	Verdi
<i>Madame Butterfly</i>	.	.	.	.	Puccini
<i>Tosca</i>	.	.	.	.	Puccini
<i>Marta</i>	.	.	.	.	Flotow
<i>L'Amore dei Tre Re</i>	.	.	.	.	Montemezzi
<i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>	.	.	.	.	Debussy
<i>Romeo et Juliette</i>	.	.	.	.	Gounod
<i>Die Fledermaus</i>	.	.	.	.	Johann Strauss
<i>Der Fliegende Holländer</i>	.	.	.	.	Wagner
<i>Die Meistersinger</i>	.	.	.	.	Wagner
<i>Parsifal</i>	.	.	.	.	Wagner

and two cycles of *The Ring*.

The company included that really first-rate singer, Rosa Ponselle, Mademoiselle Norena, the tenors, Gigli and Pertile, and the basses, Stabile, Cotreuil, Badini; and for the German season, Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schumann, Freda Leider, and Herr Mayr.

As we see, there has been no startling change in the taste of the subscribers, which, of course, regulates the policy of the directors. The balance of merit, if any, is in favour of thirty years ago. It will be noticed that neither of these seasons included many "display" operas for the *prima donna*.

There is no doubt, however, but that *Rosenkavalier* and *The Ring* cycles have drawn far more crowded and enthusiastic audiences than have the Italian operas during the last few years. This, I imagine, is partly owing to the fact that there are just now no such public idols as were Melba and Caruso, and partly to the great growth in popularity of the orchestra, which, in all but Wagner's early operas, is very much the *prima donna*.

Wagner, as a matter of fact, was not a good opera writer, but he was the greatest master of the orchestra

the world has ever seen. It is in this glorious, warm, surging flood of orchestral music in which the sensuously beautiful recurring themes are woven together in one vast and gorgeous tapestry of sound, that lies his attraction. How many of those who attend *The Ring* cycle can say truthfully that they take any interest in the fate of those tedious gods and goddesses who tell the stories of their uninteresting lives at such interminable length? or even that they have a very clear idea as to what it is all about? And is there anything in the whole realm of opera more ridiculous than the silly and childish giants, dwarfs, and dragons, and all the worn-out paraphernalia of Wagner's *mise en scène*?

The truth is that his genius far transcended that of any producer, and thus, scenes that were sublime in his musical imagination, and which he was able to translate into notes, are merely comic when seen on the stage. Take, for instance, the famous *Ride of the Valkyries*. Anyone listening to Wagner's music with closed eyes can easily imagine the triumphant screams of those Amazons, as they swoop down on the battlefield, seize the slain heroes, and bear them to Walhalla. Give but one glance at the stage, and your illusions are immediately destroyed. Wagner unfortunately lacked the *sens du théâtre*, without which no one can write a good opera, and which is almost exclusively a Latin quality. He never knew when to stop, and is constantly spoiling the dramatic situation in consequence. It is all very well to say, as his disciples are so fond of saying, that it was impossible for him to develop the subtle psychology of his characters unless at considerable length, but an operatic story, to be dramatically effective, must move quickly. One must remember, too, that subtle psychology is apt to miss its mark when sung to the accompaniment of a large orchestra in a language imperfectly understood by the audience.



# ROYAL OPERA

COVENT GARDEN

Lessors: Covent Garden Opera Syndicate (1930), Ltd.

THIS EVENING'S PERFORMANCE

Monday, June 22nd, 1931, at 8.30

Puccini's OPERA

## LA BOHÈME

In Italiano

Mimi	.	EIDE NORENA
Musetta	.	ODETTE DE FORAS
Rodolfo	.	BENIAMINO GIGLI
Marcello	.	MARIANO STABILE
Colline	.	FERNANDO AUTORI
Schaunard	.	ARISTIDE BARACCHI
Benoit	.	OCTAVE DUA
Alcindoro	.	
Parpignat	.	GIUSEPPE NESSI
Conductor	.	TULLIO SERAFIN

A COVENT GARDEN PROGRAMME



## COLORATURA SINGERS, OPERA COMPOSERS

But Wagner has long been a *culte*, and to His worshippers everything He did still has the validity of Holy Writ. I remember some twenty-five years ago, when Nikisch tried to shorten *Tristan und Isolde*. He made such judicious cuts that the opera, whose only defect is its *longueurs*, held one spellbound from the rise of the curtain until its fall. A shocked chorus of *Nole me Tangere* arose from every side. That Nikisch dared to touch *Him*! So no one has since ventured to do so, and his operas drag their weary length from five-fifteen to eleven-thirty, and the public fills Covent Garden because it loves the orchestra. Opera is of necessity a thoroughly artificial form of art, and the more its composers try to be realistic, the more they get away from life. You cannot represent life itself on the stage, and give in three hours an episode which would take three days to live through. The most you can do is to illustrate certain vital incidents, *tant bien que mal*.

Ernest Newman seems to think that even now we do not understand Wagner. He calls for more and ever more documents about that heaven-born genius and unspeakable person, and I am convinced that he will not rest until Wagner's ultimate laundry bill—unpaid, or settled by Liszt—has been unearthed! And what is the good of it all? Wagner was thoroughly unsatisfactory, ungrateful, and dishonest in all his dealings, and I cannot see how a greater knowledge of his character and daily life can help us to the better understanding of his music. Character can never explain *genius*, but genius can sometimes excuse character. “Of your charity . . .”

All this, you will say, has very little to do with Melba. *C'est possible, Messieurs!* But, on the other hand, opera, its composers, and its exponents, are inextricably bound together. It is a fascinating form of entertainment, for it gives one a combination of music, drama, and scenic art, plus the opportunity

of hearing famous singers. One could wish, however, that its composers would try to remember that it is supposed to be an entertainment, not merely a vehicle in which to try out their various musical or unmusical experiments. We have the "Folk Song" cranks, such as Vaughan Williams; composers like Pizzetti, to whom the *line* is so all-important that one feels it would matter very little if they dispensed with the music altogether; the *atonal* fiends, Schönberg, Goossens, and company, and others who sacrifice everything to atmosphere. I once had high hopes of Stravinsky, the composer of *Petrouchka*, but, alas! the neo-Bach Stravinsky of to-day has disappointed them.

Someone once defined Stravinsky as "a composer who *started* as a genius." It is a good definition, but one that does not, I think, sum him up once and for all. So restless and intelligent is his mind, that I should not be in the least surprised if he also *finished* life as a genius. He and Arnold Schönberg are the typical representatives of the radical—one may almost say revolutionary—ideas of the ultra-modern composer, who has thrown overboard both the Romanticism of the nineteenth century and the impressionism of Debussy and his school, and whose aim is apparently stark realism. This movement is represented in painting by Cezanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, and their followers, whose work has considerable affinity with that of the so-called primitive Italian painters, Cavallini, Giotto, Ugolino da Siena, and their contemporaries. In poetry it must, I am afraid, be held responsible for Gertrude Stein.

Stravinsky's influence, however, is likely to be an infinitely more vital one than that of Schönberg, for his is by far the most musical nature, and he possesses genius instead of mere ingenuity. Both composers have alert, inquisitive minds, and both are intensely interested in the enlarged possibilities that lie in the

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use of conflicting tonalities, but Stravinsky uses atonality with more intelligence, and rarely reaches that point of harmonic negation which is an essential part of Schönberg's musical scheme. Schönberg has not so far written anything which has made, or indeed is ever likely to make, an appeal to the general musical public, while Stravinsky has given us at least two works of supreme beauty and genius, *Petrouchka* and *L'Oiseau de Feu*. And, savage, discordant, and vaguely sinister as it is, *Le Sacre du Printemps* is a work of real significance.

Stravinsky does not believe in waiting for inspiration. He tells us that all his best work has been written to order. In this he is like the German composer, Paul Hindemith, in whose works I am utterly unable to discover anything but an infernal and intensely irritating facility. Ernest Newman wittily described his music as "the idle thoughts of a busy fellow." Hindemith thinks that music should be ordered when required, like any other commodity, and is evidently looking forward to the time when the musical housewife calls him up on the telephone and says: "Please send me one of your best love-songs and see that it is nice and tender." Alas! I fear that when she got it she would at once decide to take her custom elsewhere.

Had Stravinsky not gone musically insane, I am convinced that he could have written a first-class opera. He has most of the qualities necessary: imagination, dramatic force, the art of saying in a phrase what some composers take several pages to convey, and he is a past master in the use of the orchestra. And if his melody is more often borrowed than original, at least he goes to good sources to find it: the infinitely rich store of folk music of his native land.

Few composers now-a-days seem to take into consideration the fact that operas are supposedly meant

to be *sung*. They will have nothing to do with melody, sentiment, or romance, forgetting that in art, as in life, intelligence is not enough! In both cases the qualities of the heart are needed; generosity, sentiment, depth of feeling. The public remains as romantic as ever, and asks nothing better than to wallow in sentiment. And so it crowds to the Queen's Hall to hear the music of such composers as Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, or Wagner, and ignores Messrs. Schönberg, Goossens, Pizzetti, and their like. It is interested in Stravinsky, but then Stravinsky wrote *Petrouchka*. Sooner or later, the "man in the street" always recognizes great music. He did so in the case of Wagner, whom the ignorant writer is so fond of quoting as having been neglected in his lifetime, when, as a matter of fact, his genius was never for a moment questioned, and many years before his death he suffered from too much adulation.

Most of our "young" musical hopes are beginning to get on in years, and if they have not conquered the public, it is because they have not in them the inherent qualities that go to make victors. So if they are neglected it doesn't much matter. What *does* matter, however, is that the dreary, arid music now being written does definite harm to musical taste. As I have already said, the world is incurably romantic. The love of romance in whatever form it takes, is due to the wish to escape from the ugliness of life, to forget worry, poverty, sickness, and all the ills that flesh is heir to, in the enjoyment of beautiful sound, colour, or ceremonial. That is why the Anglo-Catholic churches are crowded, and romantic fiction is so popular. And failing anything new that is worth while, people are driven to jazz: the most mawkishly sentimental form of music ever evolved; the product of the illiterate, semi-barbaric, sickeningly puling soul—or whatever you like to call it—of the American negro.

## COLORATURA SINGERS, OPERA COMPOSERS

Opera requires every kind of artistic gift the composer can bring to it. The most perfect union —to my mind—of the various elements necessary to the making of a good opera has been achieved by Verdi in *Otello* and in *Falstaff*, and by Puccini in his inimitable little masterpiece, *Gianni Schicchi*, but curiously enough, neither of these operas are properly appreciated by the public.

The subject of *Otello* has never been a popular one for some reason or other, and it is not very often given. With the exception of *Falstaff* it is incomparably Verdi's best opera; it is a work of sheer genius, full of exquisite melody, and subtle imagination, and the orchestra expresses every shade of every situation with supreme art. But *Falstaff* and *Gianni Schicchi* are comedy-operas, and the average opera-goer deeply resents both *prima donna* and tenor being alive at the fall of the curtain!

Some day a composer will arise who will take the best elements of all the warring schools, ancient and modern, *coloratura* and lyric singers, harmony, and counterpoint, and with the alchemy of genius fuse them into a perfect whole.

Until he comes we must possess our souls in patience.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### I CONTINUE TO DIGRESS

IT is all very well to lament that at present no great operas are being written—which is perfectly true—and that even if there were, no singers who will bear comparison with those of the past are available to sing them—which is not true at all. And it is very easy to heap abuse on the various opera companies that are trying to keep opera going in England, but does that help matters? Things will never improve until the public itself takes a hand, and begins to show some musical curiosity, and encourages the production of new and little known works. Melba would have been only too delighted to appear in operas of a different type to those in which the public insisted on hearing her had there been any demand for novelty. But as she herself said, “There are some things in England that do not change. Look at the provinces. Do you realize that they are asking for exactly the same things in music as they demanded forty years ago? Do you realize that when I go to big towns which possess, according to popular tradition, such good taste, I am compelled time and time again to sing the same old songs, and that whenever I endeavour to put something new on the programme I am regarded as positively eccentric? Do you realize that even now, in this year of grace, 1925, wherever I go I am being asked to sing Tosti’s ‘Good-bye,’ ‘Comin’ Thro’ the Rye,’ and all the

#### I CONTINUE TO DIGRESS

other old tunes that they have heard a thousand times? I try Debussy; I try Duparc, Ravel; I try anything and everything which strikes me as beautiful and fresh, and always I am greeted with the same response, enthusiastic, it is true, but tame compared with the positive uproar which I receive when I sing the old favourites."

Now all this is perfectly true, not only with regard to songs, but also orchestral concerts, pianoforte, and violin recitals, and above all, with opera. *Who* would be an impresario? As I have already remarked, why on earth men ever embark in operatic management, and even after they have failed, continue in it, is a mystery. Krehbiel says that the desire to manage an opera company is a form of disease, and refers to a manager who got himself into the Fleet Prison, and argued philosophically that not only did it serve him right, as no man insane enough to be an operatic impresario ought to be allowed at large, but also that a prison was the only proper headquarters of a manager, since there, at least, he was free from the importunities of singers and dancers.

The truth is that opera, properly rehearsed and produced with the best available singers, can never pay. It is far too expensive a business. A musical comedy, once the production expenses are paid, will, if it is successful, run for months, but an opera-house has to provide for three or four changes of programme a week, each production requiring different scenery, different costumes, and different singers. There is only one way to have good opera, and that is for wealthy music-lovers to subscribe enough money to cover the inevitable losses, and to engage a small committee of artistic directors, and let them draw up the *répertoire* for the season, without regard to the box office. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that the ordinary *répertoire* should be scrapped; only

that each season half the operas given should consist of interesting old works, revivals, and novelties.

But unless there are enough wealthy opera-lovers who are prepared to lose their money, I do not see how things can be much better than they are, and incidentally, I do not envy Colonel Eustace Blois, Mr. Edgar, and the other members of the present syndicate at Covent Garden. They are charming men, and they know their job thoroughly, but the backers do not want to lose more money than they can help, so they have to do the best they can. They ransack Europe for singers, and engage all the most famous ones available. One cannot grumble when, in the space of ten weeks, one can hear such artistes as Freda Leider, Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schumann, Herr Mayr, Melchior, Rosa Ponselle, Iva Pacetti, and Messieurs Gigli, Pertile, Badini, Franci, and Stabile, to mention only a few, with Bruno Walter and Serafin to conduct. The management, however, is obliged to use them year after year for cycles of *The Ring*, and a few other popular German operas, and the old threadbare Italian *répertoire*, so they are between the devil and the deep sea. If they don't give novelties, spend a lot of money on new scenery and lighting, the critics rend them to pieces, and if they do, the public stop away. And the critics don't pay for their seats!

There are critics, hypercritics and hypocritics, but I am not at all sure if it makes very much difference what they say. We are a faddy, *blasé* lot, and no two of us are agreed about anything! It is quite common to read two diametrically opposed points of view about the same performance or the same artiste from two critics of equal eminence, in the newspaper accounts of a concert or an opera. Criticisms often depend a good deal on the mood of the gentlemen who write them; on if they are comfortable, and how they have dined. One, perhaps, has Wagner on the

## I CONTINUE TO DIGRESS

brain, and another has just discovered Verdi; while a third hates all music written since Bach. And at least half a dozen wish Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, and everyone else to the devil! Critics are asked to listen to too much music. A famous critic told me that he had almost got to the stage when music had become to him just a noise; agreeable at times, at other times almost unbearable. Ernest Newman once described his concert-going to me thus: "I go from the station to the place of execution, and afterwards I am taken to the place from whence I came." And I almost answered: "And next day you hang the artiste by the neck until he is dead!"

It is maddening to see the use that is made of the magnificent talent that is to be found at Covent Garden every year. Rosa Ponselle is a great singer and one hears her in *Norma* and *La Forza del Destino*! And if tenors were refused engagements unless they chose to use what brains Nature had given them, one might yet hear Gigli and Pertile using their lovely voices artistically. Think how wonderful Melba would have been in Mozart, with her exquisite phrasing and sense of style, and she would have been willing enough to sing in *Figaro* and *The Magic Flute*, though in her day the opera was a far more social affair than it is now, and I can quite imagine that Royalty would have expressed its views quite clearly had it not approved of the *répertoire*!

During her last visit to London, Melba, who was genuinely interested in music, was talking about it to me, and said that if only the different backers would combine, the thing could be done. But Beecham likes to play a lone hand, and when Lord Howard de Walden has backed opera substantially, it has generally been on some occasion when he has had a personal interest in the works produced. Thank goodness the B.B.C. is joining up with the only syndicate that does give us international opera.

But what a number of delightful works there are that one never hears. *Orfeo* and *Armide* of Gluck, *Orfeo* of Monteverdi, the complete cycle of Mozart's operas, the Mahler edition of Weber's *Oberon*, *La Reine de Saba* of Goldmarck, *Königskinder* of Humperdinck, *Les Pêcheurs des Perles* of Bizet, *Le Coq d'or* of Rimsky-Korsakoff; and what a charming double bill would be a revival of Ravel's amusing and brilliant *L'Heure Espagnole* and Gounod's *Philémon et Baucis!* Yes, Gounod, *mes enfants!* I suppose that if by any chance the eyes of a modern musician happen to light on this page, he will hurl the book violently across the room and smash something!

The mention of *Les Pêcheurs des Perles*, a gem of an opera, reminds me of a story Melba told me of a lady who liked to pose as a patron of the arts, music especially. Sir Thomas Beecham had just produced it at Covent Garden. As is usual in London with any work which is not well known, it had a very lukewarm reception, and the lady in question who had attended some of the rehearsals had expressed her opinion regarding it with great frankness. The following day she met Sir Thomas at a friend's house, and could not refrain from saying, "I told you so." "Perhaps you were right," said Sir Thomas, and, sitting down to the piano, played a charming melody. "How do you like that?" he asked. "Oh, it is exquisite. What is it?" "It is from an opera I have had submitted to me and that I am thinking of putting on. And this?" he said, playing another melody. "Quite *too* lovely," she exclaimed. "What is the name of the opera? And who wrote it? You simply *must* do it." "It is the opera you heard last night, *Les Pêcheurs des Perles*, and a certain composer called Georges Bizet wrote it," was the reply.

If Colonel Blois ever took it into his head to write his reminiscences, he could tell us a lot of amusing stories of opera-singers and their fads and fancies, and

#### I CONTINUE TO DIGRESS

the intrigues that go on, though, as I have already remarked, singers are now-a-days far more normal and businesslike than they used to be. I went to Maggie Teyte's dressing-room with him last year to congratulate her when she reappeared in *Madame Butterfly* after her long absence from the operatic stage. Seeing "Butterfly's baby girl," Blois said: "So this is the little lady." A squeaky, breaking voice answered: "Little gentleman, please, sir." It was an undersized boy of about fifteen who had taken the part! I wonder they don't use one of those wonderful dolls that look absolutely natural and can be guaranteed not to overact, for the baby in *Madame Butterfly*. The size of the children who generally play the part rather suggests that Butterfy wasn't quite playing the game with Pinkerton!

The days of the worship of *prima donnas*, of great pianists and violinists, actors and actresses is, I think, definitely over. People now-a-days do not buy their photographs, wait patiently for hours to see them, and fight for their autographs. By all accounts Patti, in the early part of her career, created such excitement that youths used to unharness the horses of her carriage and drag it to her hotel. I have always been rather sceptical about such happenings. They were probably arranged by her impresario. In any case, as Ernest Newman says, it would be more difficult with a motor-car. They would have to remove the carburettor, or whatever it is that makes the thing go, and a motor is a pretty hefty machine to drag far.

That there is less enthusiasm over operatic and theatrical stars than there used to be is partly their own fault, and partly that of the times we live in. Celebrities are apt to make themselves too cheap, the public sees and hears too much of them, for, not content with preserving their mystery and appearing only on the stage, they all want to make speeches on the wireless, open bazaars, and give their generally

worthless opinions on everything under the sun. And, of course, one can turn them all on at any moment on the gramophone. And when you have listened to the records of Madame So-and-so, whom you are going to hear that evening at Covent Garden; heard her tell you on the wireless that she always sings her baby to sleep with a melody by Schönberg or "The Rosary" when it is fractious; eaten at dinner a dish named after her, and then heard her at the opera, you have had enough of the lady and feel no desire to push her car back to the Ritz!

And apart from all this, there is a wholly admirable and growing tendency to put the music before the singer. People are at last beginning to be tired of seeing everything sacrificed to the star, and of putting up with any opera that she chooses as a vehicle for display. And even if she happens, for once, to choose an opera worth hearing, the effect is lost if she is allowed to subordinate everything to her own vanity. I remember seeing Chaliapine play Mephistopheles three or four years ago; it was a deplorable exhibition. The opera was no longer *Faust*; it was the very Devil!

This tendency will make things more and more difficult for the managers of opera companies. They are all at present living on their operatic capital, and when the inevitable day arrives when the public is tired of the very limited *répertoire*, which is now the operatic stock in trade, and has not been trained to take an interest in any others, there will be a *débâcle*. Opera is, however, so fascinating a form of art that there is not much danger of it being allowed to die. I am convinced, as I have already said, that some genius will arise who will give it new and vigorous life.

But I do not think that opera-houses will ever again be ruled by *prima donnas*. Not even by a Melba!

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### MELBA'S SINGING

IN what lay that curious and unique quality in Melba's art which fascinated not only the general public, but also the musicians and the critics? She had a lovely voice, but then, so had other *coloratura* sopranos of her day; Sembrich, Eames, and Calvé, for instance. Her technique was perfect; so was theirs. She was a beautiful woman: so were they. Calvé, too, was an incomparably better actress, and Sembrich was infinitely more cultured musically.

I think that Melba herself explained it in a remark she once made when she and Bemberg and I were driving together one day. "My voice is like a glorified boy's voice," she said.

She was right. It had the ineffable purity, the early morning spring-time freshness, and the effortless ease you sometimes hear in a boy's voice. It was passionless, but in its very lack of passion there was infinite pathos. There is a pathos in austerity, as everyone who has learnt to appreciate the art of the early Sienese painters, knows. Melba never "scooped" up to a high note; she took it naturally, landing exactly in the middle of it, and she never used the *tremolo*, except as a special effect. There was indeed much of the boy in her character; she had the boy's directness, truthfulness, and hatred of lies and double dealing, and she was amused by the rather crude practical jokes that amuse a boy. Speaking of boys' voices, she once said while listening to that wonderful record of "Hear My Prayer," made by the "Temple child," "I could murder that infant; he has all the qualities I worked for years to acquire—phrasing, breath control, diction: everything."

I once heard in Paris a wonderful tribute to the

curiously angelic quality of her voice. She was staying with Bemberg, and he invited me to lunch one day. It was a lovely spring morning, and as I approached the Boulevard Jules Sandeau where he was then living, the quiet street was suddenly flooded with the sound of her exquisite singing. She ran up the scale of G major, improvised a cadenza, trilled—as only she *could* trill—on G and A, and ended with a long-drawn-out B natural. The *cocher* stopped at the sound of her voice, and when the last note died away turned to me and said: “*Mais, Monsieur, c'est un ange qui chante!*” I never saw her so pleased with a compliment.

Bemberg himself told me that he often stood outside her door to listen to her practising, and he was no easy person to please. He was, at that time, the spoiled darling of every great *prima donna* in Europe. Another of her most fervent admirers was Joachim, who said her voice was the loveliest voice he had ever heard. He compared it to a Stradivarius violin.

I was irresistibly reminded of her last summer at Winchelsea. I went there to the dedication of the five wonderful windows, and the new organ which Lord Blanesburgh gave to the beautiful abbey church. The musical part of the service was rendered by the choir of the Temple Church, and when it was over, they proceeded to the west door and sang, unaccompanied, a setting of Cory’s haunting poem, “They told me, Heraclitus”—one of the best renderings of Greek verse ever made:

“ They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,  
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to  
shed.

I wept, as I remember’d, how often you and I  
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,  
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest;  
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;  
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.”

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The old churchyard with its ruined arches, was flooded with the bright May sunshine, and gay with lilac and laburnum. Birds were singing in the trees; in the adjoining meadow a lark rose, and the fresh young voices of the boys joined with the hymn of Nature in a strain of poignant and unforgettable beauty that brought tears to the eyes of the listener. Melba would have loved it.

Her facility was astonishing; her trill alone would have made her famous. I have heard all the great *coloratura* singers of the last forty years, and I have never heard a trill that came within measurable distance of it. It was as easy and natural as that of a bird—or a very good flute-player—and she had absolute command over every gradation of tone. And what a technique! One of the London critics writing about her in *Traviata* in 1908 said: “Her voice gymnastics were simply amazing and her own intense enjoyment of them was delightful. Up and down the scale she went in trills and runs and roulades, and when she ended like a fireworks display, with a shower of golden notes, the whole house applauded her with all its might.”

What was even more delightful was that she made her vocal gymnastics sound musical. Her voice was absolutely even throughout its entire range; and her vocal organs were so built that it was apparently impossible for her to sing out of tune. She often said, laughingly, “I think I must have a specially constructed throat, for when I sing a chromatic scale I have the feeling that it is a keyed instrument and that I am pressing each note down.”

It is the fashion at present to regard florid music rather contemptuously; as being, indeed, beneath the notice of a serious musician, but sung as Melba sang it, it is a sheer joy, for apart from the sensuous beauty of the mere sound, there is always a thrill in seeing a terrifically difficult feat accomplished with ease. But

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if it is anything less than perfect, there is nothing more painful.

Who has not cursed the young—or not very young—soprano, with a mediocre voice, an imperfect technique, and more than uncertain intonation, struggling with *Caro Nome*, or “The Jewel Song” from *Faust*? sung perhaps in that remarkable English translation which begins:

“ Oh the joy, the-e-e-eese jew-els fine to wear! ”

A man I knew in Rochester (New York) once asked me to dinner to hear his wife sing. She had been studying in Milan, and burned with the desire to appear as Violetta on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. She obliged with *Una voce poco fa*. It was a deplorable exhibition, and I didn’t know what on earth to say. But I need not have been at all uncomfortable. The lady told me that her friends considered her voice to be of much the same quality as that of Melba, who, she assured me, always had to spray her throat with a solution of cocaine before singing that *aria*. My suggestion that in *her* case the anæsthetic should be administered to the audience, was treated as a somewhat misplaced joke.

A *coloratura* soprano must possess a voice of first-rate quality, and even throughout its range; there must be no sense of effort in even the most exacting and brilliant passages; it must be dead in tune, and the singer must herself take intense pleasure in what she is doing. In other words, such singing, in order to be worth hearing, requires a superlatively great singer. This Melba was, and she was therefore fully justified in doing what she was able to do so supremely well.

When we consider how many years some famous singers have devoted to perfecting themselves in their art, it seems rather surprising that Melba was able to make her *début* nine months after she went to study with Marchesi; but they were nine months of intensive

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study, and her voice had never to be placed. As someone said of her, "Her tones were jewels already set."

She was a born singer, and in this connection there is no more foolish saying than the oft-quoted and oft-controverted—"Genius is the art of taking infinite pains." That is exactly what genius is *not*. Genius is the art of being able to do naturally what other people take infinite pains in trying to acquire and never succeed in acquiring. When to genius you add the art of taking infinite pains, you get a Melba, a Paderewski, a Kreisler.

Then, too, Melba had not tired her voice by singing too early. She herself said to a friend: "I didn't sing much as a child: I only hummed. And, by the way, a child's voice should be carefully guarded. I consider the *ensemble* singing in schools as ruinous to good voices. Everyone tries to outdo the other, and the tender vocal chords are strained and tired. I, personally, did not seriously study singing till after my marriage."

This is probably the reason why very few of the boy choristers with lovely voices, of whom there are so many in England, ever develop into fine singers in after life. A girl's voice changes gradually, but a boy's voice changes so continuously after he reaches the age of puberty, that to over-fatigue it is fatal.

Melba has been constantly reproached with not being musical. Nothing could be more grotesquely untrue. As we have already seen, she learnt as a child to play the violin, piano, and organ, and frequently played the organ in a local church. She was a more than merely competent pianist, being also a good accompanist and sight-reader. What is more, she had an infallible sense of rhythm, and phrased perfectly.

At an evening party I once heard her do a thing which would have puzzled an unmusical singer—*et ce*

*n'est pas ça qui manque*—to do. She was singing Bemberg's *Nymphs et Sylvains*, the most charming of all waltz songs, and he was accompanying her. He had played it, of course, so often that it had become almost mechanical, which is sometimes dangerous and proved so on this occasion, for just as he was playing the little symphony which leads to the final cadenza, he forgot what he was doing and modulated into the wrong key. Melba, without turning a hair, took the phrase up in this key, improvised a few bars leading back into the right one, and finished the song without anyone having noticed the mistake. Afterwards she dealt with him frankly, saying: "Hermann, you fool, what's the matter? Are you drunk?"

The well-known American musical critic, H. E. Krehbiel, after speaking of Melba's perfect technique, her exquisite voice, and the generous way in which she used it, never sparing herself, but always singing her very best, wrote: "Added to these gifts and graces, she disclosed most admirable musical instincts, a quality which the people had been taught to admire more than ever while they were learning how to give reverence due to the dramatic elements in the modern lyric drama."

Marvellous, however, as was Melba in florid music, I liked her even better in lyric rôles, and this in spite of the fact that her acting never got much beyond the rudimentary stage. Here at least criticism was justified. At the beginning of her career she reduced the art to its simplest proportions. To express a mild emotion such as her love for Romeo, or her pleasure when she opened the Jewel Casket in *Faust*, she raised one arm; when passion or despair were called for—two!

But, after all, what did it matter? She could express anything she wanted to—joy, sorrow, innocence, gaiety, passion, despair—what you will—with

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her voice. Who that has ever heard her sing Mimi in *La Bohème*, can forget the involuntary murmur of delight that fluttered through Covent Garden when the phrase Mimi sings "off" just before her entrance was heard? She sang it softly, but not a note was lost. There was everything in it—youth, modesty, regret, and wistful sweetness. "How could she express all that in so short a phrase?" you ask. How indeed? But she did. Here it is:

*By permission of Messrs. Ricordi.*

By a curious paradox her very lack of dramatic force made her Marguerite a more convincing portrait of the victim of the eternal tragedy of love, birth, and death, than was that of Calvé, admirable actress as she was. Melba could express innocence, a virtue quite unknown to Calvé! There is such a thing as overacting, and Calvé certainly overacted at times.

I remember once going with Bemberg to a supper-party at which she was present. We had been to the opera and heard her in *Carmen*. During supper Bemberg said to her: "I wish, Emma, that I could hear you *sing Carmen again*." "Why?" Calvé answered. "What do you mean? I sang it this evening and you were there." "I said, 'I wish I could hear you *sing Carmen again*,'" said Bemberg.

Another rôle for which Melba's qualities exactly suited her was that of Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello*. Her Italian, by the way, was infinitely better than her French, for though she spoke that language with considerable fluency, her pronunciation of it remained throughout her life *Tel que l'on parle* at Stratford-atte-Bow! It was impossible not to feel exasperated sometimes, especially as her faultless diction served merely to emphasize her failing in this respect. I shall never forget her "*Ni demoiselle ni belle*" on one occasion when she was singing in *Faust* with Plançon and with Alvarez, who spoke French like a Frenchman.

But to return to *Otello*, an opera which, as I have already remarked, has never appealed to the popular taste in any country. Well, so much the worse for popular taste, which revels in the vulgar crudities of *Tosca*. *Otello*, with the sole exception of *Falstaff*, is to my mind the nearest approach to perfection in opera form—that is, the combination of music and drama—that has ever been written. It has every quality. Verdi's characterization in this opera is more subtle than you will find in any of the operas of

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Wagner. Take the scene where Iago relates Cassio's dream to Otello. The contrast between the two is inimitable, and the orchestral commentary a masterpiece of wit and irony. Where else, except in some of the older Italian operas, do you find such wonderful musical dialogue, or recitatives? It is full of exquisite melody, and Verdi's sense of drama was unerring. In a word, the music is worthy of the play, and yet, as I have said, it is not popular!

To Melba's eternal credit, her Desdemona was one of the very best things she ever did. Vocally, of course, it was beyond criticism, but it was more than that, for it showed an understanding and sympathy to which she did not always attain. She had an extraordinary gift for fitting in short phrases, half-spoken, half-sung; for instance, her "*Buona notte Emilia*" just before the final heartrending outburst in which she dismisses the girl for the night; the long night which she feels that for her will have no to-morrow. Then, too, no one has ever sung the *Ave Maria* as she sang it. I have heard many Desdemonas, but she was the only one who could sing the crescendo passage at the end of the *aria* in one breath. All the others had to repeat the *Ave*. The musical reader will remember the phrase:

In spite of Melba's love of music and her musical gifts, it was not an inborn passion with her, a necessity of her life, *Elle s'en passait très bien*. She enjoyed listening to and playing Bach, but then she

had an equal admiration for Gounod. She at one time developed a love of Wagner and was greatly moved by *Parsifal*. But she could turn from Wagner's music to that of her friend Tosti with the same enjoyment! One cannot find fault with her for being what she was; it is not given to everyone to move with confidence and joy in the rarefied atmosphere in which dwell the divinities of music. Still less is it given to everyone to know and recognize their limitations as she did. And this may be said of her in all faith: she never withheld her support from any poor and gifted student who was brought to her notice, and gave liberally in support of the musical institutions in her own country.

Her operatic *répertoire* was not large. Although during her career she sang in some twenty-five operas, she was seldom heard in any rôles except those with which she had identified herself, such as Lucia, Violetta, Gilda, Marguerite, Desdemona, and Mimi. The public wanted to hear her in those rôles, and she loved her public. I never saw her as Nedda in *Pagliacci*, but those who did, say that the part suited her admirably. Of course in such horrors as Delibes' *Lakmé*, and Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*, she was *hors de concours*, but fortunately they never caught on in London. I should like to have seen her in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*; she must have been delightful in it, but unfortunately it is only during the last few years that it has renewed its popularity in London.

Melba was the only Violetta who succeeded in making me enjoy *La Traviata*, which is to me one of the most tiresome works in the whole operatic *répertoire*. A well-known critic once said that Christine Nilsson's Violetta was a fallen angel. The same may be said of Duse's exquisite impersonation of her. Bernhardt made her a Parisian *cocotte pur sang*, with a good heart and a devil of a temper, and Emma Eames, a "perfect lady!" With Tetrazzini

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she was a nice, fat, vulgar *fille de joie*, but Melba contrived to give her the air of a *déclassé femme du monde*. As for her singing of the part, not one of the others came within a hundred miles of her. Goodness knows why she expired in the last act. There seemed to be no earthly reason why she should do so, as she radiated health and energy.

Melba very rarely attempted to sing any music which did not lie well within her voice. She allowed herself to be led astray only twice; each time in America. The first time was when she conceived the laudable desire to sing Brünnhilde, of which I have already spoken, and the second was her attempt to sing Aida, essentially a dramatic soprano rôle. All the same, I should like to have heard her sing the final duet with Caruso.

In common with nearly all famous *coloratura* sopranos, she liked, after singing half a dozen encores, to sit down to the piano and accompany herself in "Home, Sweet Home"—a song which seems to have a peculiar appeal to the masses—but unlike most of them she accompanied herself well. I have heard Madame Galli-Curci put her foot on the loud pedal at the first bar and keep it there until she finished singing. Sometimes Melba varied the procedure and sang Tosti's "Good-bye" instead! She sang songs delightfully, but her *répertoire* consisted almost entirely of the compositions of Massenet, Bemberg, Reynaldo, Hahn, Gounod, and Lalo, which were so popular twenty-five years ago. But if Melba never ventured into the higher realms of song literature, at least she never debased her exquisite talent by singing the trash so beloved of Clara Butt, "Down in the Forest." Something may have stirred, occasionally, but it was never anything worse than the song of . . . Landon Ronald!

After all, why not be content with what a great singer can give us, instead of reproaching him for the

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lack of qualities which he does not possess. The lily of the valley is none the less sweet because it has not the gorgeous hues of the peony, nor are our quiet English rivers and soft wooded hills less lovely for not having the majesty of the Alps. Melba had neither the dramatic power of a Calvé or a Ternina, nor the interpretative gift of an Elena Gerhardt, but what singer of modern times had a voice of such unique enchantment; of such siren beauty? One lost oneself in the joy of hearing it. There is on the operatic stage to-day no voice which remotely resembles it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### MELBA AND THE GRAMOPHONE

WHEN one has reached late middle age one is rather apt—in moments of depression especially—to tell the young how much more agreeable the world was when we were one-and-twenty. What we are really lamenting, however, is not the past; it is our own lost youth and vigour. “The good old days” to the people who lived in them were as modern as to-day is to us. The young accepted every new invention or convenience as a matter of course, and the old grumbled. Just as they do now, and will keep on doing “till the last syllable of recorded time.” We sometimes say: “How wonderful it must have been to have lived in the days of Queen Elizabeth, or in Florence during the Renaissance!” But, as a matter of fact, it wasn’t any more wonderful than it is to be alive in 1931. People were living their ordinary lives and it never occurred to them that their times were romantic or out of the common. The news of the French Revolution meant no more to the Londoner of 1793 than did that of the deposition of the King of Spain to us.

I don’t for one moment believe that “Merrie England” was any more merry than it is now. They had children. Thank heaven! so have we, and where there are children there is always happiness, but for the old, life must have been a good deal harder than it is under modern conditions. I fancy

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that a month of "Merrie England" would be quite enough for most of us. We should be very glad to get back to our bathrooms, electric light, central heating, railway trains, and motor-cars.

All the same very few things are an unmixed blessing. Take motor-cars, for instance. They were a delightful way of getting about when they first came in, and they still are, if you are far enough from London, but they have made the London streets impossible. Thirty years ago you could drive, let us say from the Marble Arch to Charing Cross, in much less time than you can to-day in a taxi-cab. The mechanical aids to happiness are, I think, a good deal over-rated. I frankly detest the cinema, which, however, might be quite admirable were it not chiefly in the hands of illiterate American Jews, who run it entirely for people of their own mentality. With regard to the wireless, I am still sitting on the fence. Certainly I can understand its value in remote country places in brightening the monotony of life, and I realize its infinite possibilities, but until it has improved out of all recognition "listening-in" will be unsatisfactory to the sensitive musical ear.

But the gramophone is quite another matter. To me it is one of the most fascinating and valuable inventions of the age. The mere fact that it preserves for future generations such lovely sounds as the voices of Melba and Caruso, the frail, fleeting beauty of exceptional boys' voices, or those of famous personalities, renders it a thing unique, and so far its reproduction of the voice is its most satisfactory feature. The violin records well, but you do not always get the true violin quality, especially on the G string, which on the gramophone has rather the *timbre* of a clarinet, and the higher positions on the E string are apt to be shrill. The piano, too, still eludes their efforts. They have not yet been able to eliminate entirely a suggestion of the sound that

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is produced when you put a piece of paper under the hammers. The famous pianist, Schnabel, told me that he has refused to make any records for that reason. These defects are less apparent in an *ensemble*. I can derive genuine pleasure from many of the admirable records made by the various string quartettes—the Lener and the Flonzaley Quartettes, for instance; and some of the orchestral records are excellent, if you are not too close to the instrument. The gramophone, however, is being improved almost from month to month, and I have no doubt that eventually all these defects will be remedied.

There is something curiously uncanny about an instrument which enables you to sit in your chair and listen to the voices of those who have long been mouldering in their graves. The other day some of them gave a concert for me. The vocalists were Melba, Caruso, Kirkby Lunn, and Journet. Ysaye was the violinist, and Saint-Saëns played his compositions on the piano. In their lifetimes they had all been personal friends of mine: I knew every inflexion of the singers' voices, and there I sat while the poor dead made music; such music as few of the living can make. What would that concert have cost had they taken part in it while they were still in the land of the living? But now, offer them all the jewels and gold in the world and not one skeleton hand will be stretched out to grasp it.

I do not think that it is possible to over-estimate the value of the gramophone. Old gentlemen in the future will not be able to bore the young by telling them that there are no longer any singers to compare with those who flourished in *their* youth. "Ah! You should have heard Caruso." The young will answer disrespectfully, "Well, let's turn him on and see," and the "So-and-so always took that passage in such and such a manner" will be able to be verified. And even now, it is the best singing master

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in the world. Singers are not the most modest of people, but even *their* vanity must wilt on hearing the *arias* with which they are struggling sung by the most famous artistes in the world. The professor who is teaching some ambitious soprano the rôle of Desdemona, can now put on the Melba record and say, "Listen: this is how it ought to sound"; and what tenor would be foolish enough to attempt to sing one of the Neapolitan folk-songs without first listening to Caruso's rendering of it.

Melba recognized the possibilities of the gramophone very early, but it was a long time before she would have anything to do with it. She conducted the intricate negotiations with extraordinary skill and an admirable mixture of business and sentiment, insisting that nothing on earth would induce her to allow them to be published, as they were for her "*Dear Daddy*" in Australia. Finally all difficulties were overcome—that is to say, the gramophone people came up to the scratch and accepted her terms. Very naturally, she stipulated for trials, and saw to it that her interests were safeguarded. The first records were made in the big drawing-room at 30 Great Cumberland Place, the house she had taken from Mrs. Hwfa-Williams. She sang *Ah! fors è lui* from *La Traviata*, and *Caro Nome* from *Rigoletto*, accompanied by an orchestra of sixty got together and conducted by Landon Ronald. The result horrified her. "Never again," she said, as she listened to the strange, scratching sounds which issued from the machine. "If my voice sounds like that, I'll go away and live on a desert island." So the records were destroyed.

But recording began to improve out of all knowledge. The Company, too, would not let her alone, and she received hundreds of letters begging her to record. She decided to try again, and this time was delighted with the result, and with every new



The latest photograph of MADAME MELEA.  
A WORD TO OUR PATRONS.

The Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd. beg to say that, in view of the above statements, they will leave no stone unturned, and let no financial consideration, however gigantic, stand in the way of all Gramophone dealers being able to stock records of Madame Melba's voice.

## Madame Melba

AND THE

## GRAMOPHONE.

Extract from

"The Daily Express"

Interviewing the greatest prima donna the world has ever known:

"As the interviewer rose to go the greater, she remarked, with a smile, "And now would you like to hear me sing a song?" Then she led the way to her sanctum. There was a semi grand piano in the room, but to the interviewer's surprise, instead of going to that she walked up to a Louis Quinze pedestal upon which stood a vase overflowing with roses. Carefully removing the vase, she raised a lid, and a strain of perfect sound round into sight. Then, pressing a button, there resounded the voice of Mme. Melba, swelling and sinking in the cadence of Handel's 'Sweet Bird'."

"And no sooner did the trill commence than a per camera, loose in the room, and perched on the top of a book case, joined its clear note in joyous rivalry. It was, indeed, an amazing reproduction of an amazing voice."

"Can any one obtain these gramophone records?" asked the astonished interviewer.

"No," she replied, and with a pathectic smile, "the photograph of the voice record is on the writing-table, added, "I am afraid, I can't give it."

"There, with a note of enthusiasm in her voice, she continued: "Is it not wonderful that one can send one's voice via telephone miles across the water? Only think of it, all future generations of my family will for ever be able to hear my voice!"

"Surely," remarked the interviewer, "the company who made these records must have been approached with a view to their public sale?"

"Mine, Melba laughed merrily. "The truth is," she said, "since it became known that these records have been made I have been inundated by letters from strangers asking if they can be bought, and also from representatives of voice reproducing machines making blathering but not singing tempest offers. Only the other day one of the latter came and asked me to narrate my own price. I told him. The gentleman left me more in debt than in anger."

THE GRAMOPHONE & TYPEWRITER LTD.

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improvement she made new records. They were sold at a guinea, which would be equal to about two guineas in the lean years in which we are now living.

My friend, Mr. Gaisberg, who is the presiding genius at Hayes, and who has soothed, fed, and comforted countless excited and nervous *prima donnas*, *seconda donnas*, violinists, and pianists, when they have visited Hayes to record, told me an amusing story of one of Melba's recordings. It took place at their studio in Maiden Lane. She was singing Gounod's *Ave Maria*, and Kubelik was playing the violin *obligato*. After two or three trials it went to perfection. Everyone was delighted, but alas! the operator in charge of the recording apparatus on lifting the disc unfortunately dropped it, and off it careered gaily, rolling from side to side like a happy drunkard. It was truly *parti*! Of course so long as it did not fall flat it was all right—if it did it was ruined—so they all of them began running after it as people run after a hat on a windy day, and to an accompaniment of curses in Australian, Bohemian, English, and French from the accompanist. They kept getting in each other's way and missing it, and Kubelik caught his feet in a rug and fell headlong. Gaisberg leant against the piano helpless with laughter. Melba finally sprinted in front of the others and caught it.

This record, though by no means her best, has proved more popular than any of the many she subsequently made. There is an old one of the "Willow Song" from *Otello*, which is a marvel of exquisite singing and phrasing, and the *Caro Nome* is excellent. None of her records had the phenomenal success of the *Una voce poco fa* and certain others made by Madame Galli-Curci. But her gramophone triumphs were fatal to her. She was not able to live up to them when she appeared in the flesh. The gramophone is much kinder than the wireless; it gives

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everyone a chance, for one can go on recording until a perfect, or sufficiently good result is obtained. This is a great blessing for nervous or uncertain artistes like Galli-Curci. Then, too, some voices undoubtedly record better than others, and in the case of orchestras, or church choirs, the acoustics of the place in which the records are made count for a great deal. The Temple Church choir, though undoubtedly the finest church choir in England, owes much to the fact that for some reason or other the church itself helps considerably in the wonderful results obtained. I believe that their record of Mendelssohn's "Hear My Prayer" sold better than any record in the "His Master's Voice" series, with the exception of those of Caruso. At one time they were printing it night and day, so great was the demand, and it is still selling well. Of course, Caruso's records are much more expensive.

A curious result of Melba's recording was the number of marriage proposals she received from men whom she had never seen or heard of, living in every quarter of the globe. It is difficult to imagine what must be the mentality of people who are anxious to marry someone whom they have never met. In the case of Melba, one cannot acquit her bold suitors from a suspicion of being mercenary. She was a highly desirable bride from a financial point of view, to say nothing of her celebrity. It is, however, quite possible to fall in love with a voice. One is inclined to wonder if marriages arranged on these lines would turn out much worse than does the average marriage? It would hardly be possible, I think.

French people have often told me that the advertisements for husbands or wives in the newspapers often result in very happy matches. At one time it was far more of a recognized thing than it is now. The reader will doubtless remember the newsboys who walked up and down in front of the

*cafés* in the Boulevard des Italiens shouting “*Achetez le Journal des Jeunes filles à marier.*” Some of the advertisements were very amusing. With real French prudence the *Jeune fille* having a suitable *dot* wanted a *Monsieur, situation en rapport*, and I liked the altruistic lovers who were willing to espouse a lady *même avec petite tâche*, always provided that the *situation* was sufficiently *en rapport!* They were all *very frank* about their personal advantages!

The process of recording when Melba made her records was very different from what it is now. It was only in 1925 that the microphone was introduced. The earliest records were made in 1902. The singer stood in front of an instrument shaped like a trumpet or horn and sang into it. This horn was connected with the recording apparatus, and the vibrations of the voice acting on it, caused the notes to be recorded on the wax. Now-a-days all that is necessary in the room where the recording is made is the microphone, whose wires connect with the recording apparatus, which may be placed anywhere within reasonable distance. In the case of an orchestral concert, or a church, it is outside in the “recording lorry” which is fitted up with everything necessary. When the record has been made the wax plate is placed in a bath of copper, which is afterwards stripped off, the copper having, of course, taken the impression of the record. From this another plate is printed, the original one being kept for the purpose of future reproductions. After undergoing various processes to harden and render the record indelible, it finally appears in the form in which we all know it.

Perfect silence must be kept after the making of the record until the all-clear signal is given, as the microphone records every sound. In the old days, so long as the person standing in front of the horn kept silence, a certain amount of noise around did not matter. There is an early record of Kreisler making

a record of François Schubert's *L'Abeille*. Immediately after the last note one can hear the irritated voice of Mrs. Kreisler, who was standing by him, exclaiming, "Fritz, I told . . . !"

It is very easy to understand the immense superiority of the microphone over the horn. Formerly, when it was a question of recording a chorus or an orchestra, it was necessary to have several horns converging in different directions in order to get the effect more or less as a whole, and even then the result was, of course, very imperfect. That is why of the old records only the vocal ones are at all satisfactory.

The museum at Hayes is an interesting place. In it are all the earliest forms of recording instruments, the old phonograph, the various types of receivers or horns used before they were all replaced by the microphone, and also—to me of even greater interest—a complete set of all the earliest records made. These include the Kreisler one, of which I have just spoken, two or three of Tamagno's records, and all the first records of Melba's voice. I found those made by Patti in her old age very interesting. If you can forget all you have heard of her, and above all, not see the rather pathetic sight of an old *prima donna* on the concert platform, it is quite possible to appreciate better the great art which is still apparent in her method. It is a thousand pities that the gramophone was not perfected in the days when Melba was at her best; hers was an ideal voice for recording. What a joy it would have been to possess records of her singing in the late 'nineties! To be able to listen once more to her exquisite *Ah! fors è lui*, Bemberg's *Nymphs et Sylvains*, or the Valse song *Je veux vivre* from *Romeo et Juliette* as she sang them then. Besides which, what an inimitable lesson for all young singers of to-day. As it is, some of her records, as I have already remarked, are admirable. I recommend everyone who can appreci-



MELBA LAYING FOUNDATION STONE OF THE  
GRAMOPHONE COMPANY'S WORKS AT HAYES.



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ate great singing to get the *Ave Maria* and the *Salce* — “Willow Song” — from *Otello*.

I once asked Mr. Gaisberg who were the singers or instrument players who recorded best. He gave me exactly the answer I expected to hear. “The greatest artistes,” he said, “are invariably the most satisfactory to deal with. They know their job thoroughly, they have perfect self-control, and at once grasp everything they are told. The smaller people are more exacting, more nervous, and have to repeat the record many more times. With some, indeed, the repetitions are almost endless.” One can understand that it must be nervous work making a record. The almost empty room, the sinister-looking little instrument, and the knowledge that in spite of the quiet surroundings they are performing for the whole world, cannot fail to work on the imagination of such temperamental beings as are great artistes. And then, let us say, you make a record with which you are pleased, and want to hear it at once? Well, the hearing of it at this stage renders the wax impression of no further use, and it must be destroyed. So you have to do it all over again, perhaps less well than before.

It is a curious thing that the *mechanical reproduction* of a voice should frequently be so much more satisfactory than the actual voice at the moment it is singing, as one gets it on the wireless. Probably this is due to chance disturbances in the air currents. But there is also this to be taken into consideration. On the wireless you hear the performance as it is with all its imperfections, while as regards recording the artiste makes the record again and again until it is perfect, or as near perfection as possible.

A great many people think that “His Master’s Voice” is the name of the Gramophone Company, but it is not so. The picture was painted some time after the Company came into being. The artist was

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inspired with the idea of it by seeing his brother's little dog looking intently into the machine and listening to the record of his master's voice. He painted the picture and submitted it to the Company, and they at once bought it. It is now without doubt the best known and most famous trade mark in the world.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### MELBA IN AUSTRALIA AND HER WAR WORK

IN 1901 Melba went back to Australia for the first time since she had become famous. She had left it in May, 1886. She landed in Brisbane in September, 1901, an interval of fifteen years. She had left it a nobody; she returned to it as the most famous living *prima donna*. Like Cæsar and Othello, she returned a conqueror, but she had accomplished more than they, for she had conquered the whole world.

With that modesty which is such an endearing trait in all *prima donnas*, she had intimated her desire that no fuss should be made over her arrival, but perhaps she was not surprised to find the Mayor and Corporation of Brisbane waiting to receive her. She was to meet her father—now well over seventy—at a place called Albury, some two hundred miles from Melbourne. It was truly a Royal progress. Every station at which the train stopped was decorated, and Mayors and local notabilities presented her with flowers and addresses, and even at those places at which it did not stop there were crowds to cheer her as she passed.

At last Albury was reached, and the great singer, forgetting the people, looked eagerly out for her father, perhaps the one person in the world whom she had always loved sincerely. But where was he? She fought her way through the crowd, thinking he was waiting for her at the barrier, and there she was met

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by a doctor who told her that he had had a stroke on the previous day, and was lying dangerously ill. It was a sad climax. There were the excited, cheering crowds, the carriage heaped with flowers, the red carpet, the civic dignitaries, but the loved figure was not there to greet her. At that moment all her triumphs seemed worthless—nothing but Dead Sea fruit.

They took her to the little house where he was lying and she knelt beside his bed. Very slowly the tired old eyes opened, and he smiled faintly. She whispered that not for anything would she leave him; that she would cancel her tour; send away the State car which had been placed at her disposal by the Government, and which had been built for the Prince and Princess of Wales when they visited Australia, but he shook his head, and with great difficulty managed to articulate the words: "No, no. You must go on. . . . You must go on . . . do not . . . disappoint." She wanted to stay, but the doctors assured her that there was no immediate danger, and she knew her father. Her presence would have retarded rather than helped his recovery, for with his rigid Presbyterian sense of honour, he would have considered that she was breaking faith with the public, and another Scotch trait would have caused him to mourn the loss of so large a sum of money. And so she went. The express had waited a whole hour for her, and as she went back to her car, the people made way with ready sympathy and forbore to cheer.

She found Melbourne *en fête*. Flags were flying, bands were playing. The music shop, where as a young girl she had so often mounted the narrow staircase to the shabby little room to take her piano and singing lessons, was specially decorated in her honour. But her thoughts were ever in that sick-room, two hundred miles away. It was not until she received a telegram a day or two later saying that her visit

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seemed to have turned the tide and that there was now every chance of his making a good recovery, that she began to renew her interest in life. Melbourne spared no trouble and expense to welcome its famous citizen. Crowds waited to see her enter her carriage; receptions and entertainments were given for her, and she was inundated with addresses, flowers, presents. She was, in fact, treated like a queen, which indeed she was. A Queen of Song.

I don't suppose that Melba, throughout her triumphant career, ever had quite such an experience as that first concert in Melbourne. It was only natural, for it was not only a personal triumph: it was a national one. Colonies are always sensitive; they are young, and the young are always on the look-out for slights. They were acutely conscious that they were not an artistic people—how should they be?—and here one of their own townsfolk, little Nellie Mitchell, as she used to be, had gone to Europe, and in fifteen years had returned to them as the undisputed reigning *prima donna* of the civilized world, and in the uncivilized worlds they have no use for *prima donnas*. So they waited in their thousands for the doors to open, and when at last their Nellie appeared, simply—but very expensively—dressed in white, unadorned save for a magnificent rope of pearls, they cheered until they could cheer no longer; cheered until it seemed impossible that the concert could ever begin; cheered indeed until Melba almost broke down, and did not know whether she was laughing or crying.

She gave five concerts in Melbourne and four in Sydney, and those nine concerts netted her the sum of £21,000. Some time afterwards when speaking to Clara Butt, who was going to Australia, and who asked her for details concerning the country, she referred to this wonderful result, saying that it was extremely unlikely that any singer would ever again earn so large a sum there. By the way, as I have

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stated in my reminiscences,<sup>1</sup> it was quite untrue that Melba ever told Clara Butt to "sing muck to the Australians," as was stated in that singer's reminiscences. The advice would have been entirely unnecessary to the popular contralto.

That she should have been so financially successful was all the more remarkable as Australia was suffering from a drought, which in Australia does not mean a few brown patches on the lawn. It means desolation, such as is caused in the East when the locusts have passed. It means sheep and cattle lying down to die and rot in the hot sun, when they have eaten the last of the green leaves left on the dying gum trees; it means the ruin of thousands of farmers; hunger, thirst, despair. It is a terrible problem for Australia, all this barren, unproductive land, in which nothing but snakes and kangaroos can live in comfort. Not that I know much about the habits of kangaroos, but I recently read an amusing essay written by a small schoolboy, who seemed well up in the subject. Here it is:

"The Kangaroo is a quadruped, but two of his feet is only hands. He is closely related to the flea family, an' jumps like him, an' has the same kind of resemblance. He is Australian by birth, an' has a watch pocket to carry his children in. There is two or more kinds of Kangaroos, but they are mostly male an' female, and live on grass, cabbage, an' curren buns. The Kangaroo's tale is his chief support: it is thick at one end an' runs to the other end. It is good to jump with, an' the Kangaroo when its cut off don't know his way home, an' has to walk on his hands. The Kangaroos good for makin' soup and bootlaces an' putting in Zoos, an' sometimes he is presented to the roil family to represent Australia."

But to return to Melba. Much as she had looked forward to this home-coming, she soon found out that

<sup>1</sup> *I Hope They Won't Mind* (Nash & Grayson).

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Mayfair and Melbourne had not much in common. She had been for so long used to all the luxuries of the older civilizations that she missed them intensely. All the little inconveniences and crudities which the native does not notice, now hit her in the face, and sometimes, especially when travelling, she felt inclined to give up her tour and go back to England. Once she had arranged to have a few old friends to dinner on a Sunday evening. On the day before, her cook came to her and asked if it was true that she proposed giving a party on the Sabbath day. When told that it was, she said : "I am not going to cook for you on the Sabbath, and I should like to give notice." "You needn't do that," said Melba. "You can go now." She repented of her independent attitude, for she found it impossible to get another cook. Melbourne was cookless, and it was only owing to her father lending her his cook that she was able to give her party. And then it was difficult enough, for in order to persuade the lady to come to her she had to go to the chief of the Tramway Company, in order to get the young man she was engaged to transferred to a tram line nearer to the house she—Melba—was living in !

People in England who grumble at the servant problem have no idea of what it is in Australia, and in Tasmania even the richest people are often obliged to do their own housework. And things are not very much better in the United States for people of only moderate means. Millionaires, of course, can have staffs as large as they like—at a price !

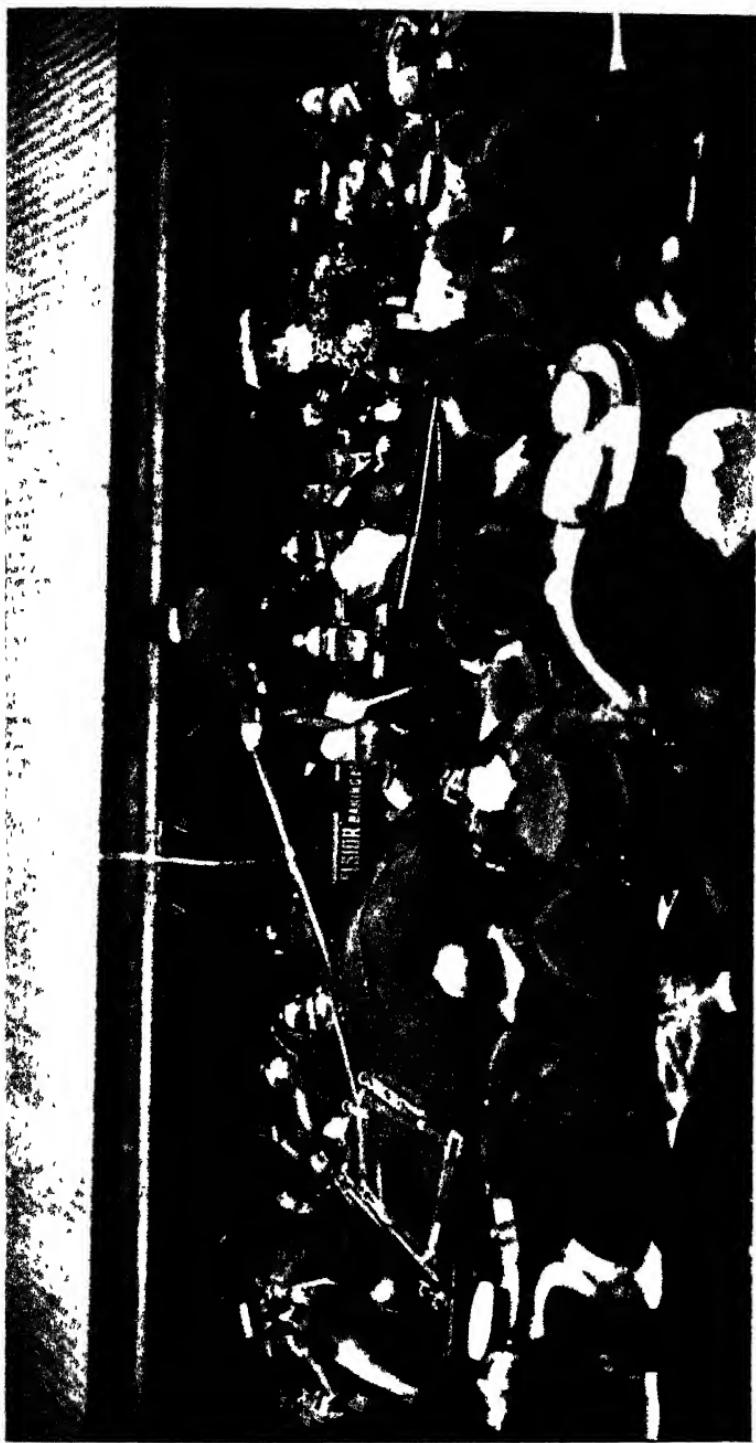
Even in her own country Melba was not spared malicious gossip. Her downright disposition and her rather hard nature had always made her enemies. One journalist, a woman, whom she had offended in Europe, delighted in collecting all the ill-natured stories she could get hold of and sending them to the Australian newspapers. She was a morphia maniac ;

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she drank; she had innumerable lovers! Nothing was too bad for them to say about her. Famous people are naturally the favourite victims of scandal-mongers, and there is no truer saying than that "mud always sticks." There will always be people to whom the names of Mr. Gladstone and of Mr. Woodrow Wilson will recall anything but their public services.

An incident that happened to Melba is a typical example of how such rumours are started. She went to Tasmania to give a concert at Launceston in this same year. Now at that time communications were very bad, and she had to make the voyage in a small paddle boat, in an appallingly rough sea, with the result that she suffered agonies from seasickness. On landing, more dead than alive, and only a few hours before the concert, she sent for a doctor, who said it would be out of the question for her to sing for several days. She was too ill to see to the necessary explanations being made, and left it all to the agent, who simply stated that Madame Melba had decided not to give the concert. When she left Launceston the next morning, a crowd had gathered at the station, and she left amid a storm of hissing. It was reported that on arriving she had called for a bottle of champagne and drunk it at one gulp; quite a feat for anyone! It was only on her second visit in 1907 that the true story was made public.

Her experiences in New Zealand were anything but agreeable. According to her account of the tour, the sturdy islanders—it is an island, isn't it?—showed their independence by being as rude as they possibly could. In the hotels she stayed at, they particularly resented her manservant. At one place she sent him to the kitchen to fetch candles for her to dress by, as there was no electric light. "What does she want candles for? She ain't a Roman Catholic," growled the proprietor, and then to the manservant, "The likes o' you agoin' out as a lady's maid!" At



MELBA'S ARRIVAL IN HER NATIVE CITY, MELBOURNE, 1902



another place she asked for supper to be prepared for her after the concert. She got the polite answer: " You've had the last meal you'll have to-day. My cook comes on at seven and goes off at seven, and she ain't agoin' to stay up at night; not for nobody." This time her man played the part of cook and gave more offence. However, the New Zealanders went in their thousands to hear her, and that was the main thing.

At Auckland the Maori chiefs gave a demonstration in her honour. The chiefs from all the surrounding settlements, dressed in full war paint, gathered before her and did her homage with all the elaborate ceremony of their ancient tradition. The spokesman, in a costume of flax and feathers, advanced, and in Polynesian told her that she was henceforth as sacred to them as their *Kovimako*, or bell-bird. During the speech, all the natives bowed rhythmically at regular intervals and chanted: "*Haere-mai! Haere-mai!*" (Welcome! Welcome!) When the orator had finished, they all yelled: "*Kia-ora-koe! Kia-ora-koe!*" (Long life to you.) Then they gave her presents—an ancient nose-flute made from the thigh bone of a victim killed in battle; a whalebone club; a feather-trimmed robe; native mats, and a jade god. Finally, the chief gave her the emblem of the rank to which she had been elected, *Luaia* and the white heron, and rubbed noses with her. Then they gave her an exhibition of native dancing, including the Maori War Dance, the *Haka*. She much preferred the Maoris to the Colonists!

Melba did not confine her Australian tours to the big cities. She loved going to the Bush towns, and it was worth her while, for miners and farmers and their families thought nothing of riding or driving in their rough vehicles forty or fifty miles to hear her. Those who could not get in stood outside, for the halls were always built of wood. They sat on fences,

climbed the roof, and even in one place where the hotel was built on piles, lay underneath in order to catch a few notes of the silver voice. What an oasis in the dull lives of those people—a Melba concert! They thought of nothing else from the time it was announced until the day arrived, and it gave them something to talk about for months afterwards. The local dressmaker was kept busy evolving strange confections in the fashion of three or four years ago, for the great ladies of the little townships. The best flowers were gathered to lay at her feet, and when it was over the local *Morning Post* filled its columns with descriptions of everything in connection with the great event.

In some of the places there was no such thing as a newspaper, and the town-crier was requisitioned. Melba's flautist and life-long friend, John Lemmone, managed these little tours for her. In one place the crier went to him and in Irish brogue said to him: "Will ye be afther wantin' the bell to-night?" "Yes," said John. "Roight ye are, you come with me and listen to how oi do it." He walked down the street, ringing his bell, and soon a crowd collected. "Oyez! Oyez!" he cried. "She's arrived, she's here, and though she's nothin' to *me*, when I tell ye she's sung before all the crowned heads of Sydney, she ought to be good enough for this one-horse town!" He continued: "We also have with us the World's Champion Fruiterer"—meaning flautist.

The people interested her immensely. She liked them and felt at home with them. One old man of seventy waited for her and said: "You were worth the money: you were all prizes and no blanks, and I know something about singing. *I was in a circus myself once!*" She tells a charming story of two small boys whom she saw crouching by the door on a very wet night. "Come in," she said to them. "But you must be very quiet." After the concert

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she smiled at the little chaps who had been spell-bound, saying : " There, you owe me a guinea each." " Madame," replied the smaller of the two with a shy and pretty smile, "*we owe you much more than that!*" She ought to have taken that infant away with her. He was evidently a born courtier.

After one of her concerts a man came up to her as she was entering her car, and said, enthusiastically : " Madame Melba, I just want to tell you how I loved your singing. I've heard the best singer in the world, Madame Galli-Curci, *and you're the next best!*"

When war broke out in 1914 Melba was in Australia. It was spring there, Wattle month, as they call it, and the country and the gardens were filled with the sweet scent of its golden branches tossing in the soft breezes. It must have been difficult at first for the Australians to realize that over there in Europe men were killing each other because of the long years of muddle and intrigue of incompetent old politicians and Ministers of State, sitting high in the council chambers of London, Paris, and Berlin. That millions of little homes had lost the breadwinner, and that millions of boys were being robbed of their youth and sent to the slaughter-house. Decent chaps, who had no hatred of their fellow-men, and to whom the real enemy was neither German, Frenchman, nor Englishman, but war itself.

I think that wars would cease in all the lands much sooner if the cowardly old rulers and heads of states could be made to fight it out among themselves, instead of hypocritically imploring the young to think of King, Emperor, *Patrie*. Meaningless words to most of them. The aftermath of war, however, has brought some good. It has awakened the people to their rights. I look round and I do not see the drunkenness and misery I used to see in London, the ragged, barefooted children, and drink-sodden, bedraggled women. Certainly the workman is better

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paid now than he used to be, and he has at any rate *some* of the amenities of life. I have never been able to understand how people with a town house and a place in the country, who keep menservants and drive in expensive cars, can affect to be indignant at the demands of the working classes. As I have already said, I love the life that money enables one to lead, and the things it buys, but I have never ceased to wonder if there is not some flaw in the lease by which I hold my hitherto pleasant and easy existence.

Melba took up war work enthusiastically. She knitted, as she herself admitted, with incredible incompetence, and got up innumerable concerts for war charities, above all for the Red Cross. A young friend of mine told me that the time spent in hospital seemed to him a respite from hell, but he felt that all the care and nursing he received had only one aim: the cruel hurry to send him back there as soon as possible. But those things have to be, and so successful was Melba in getting money out of people that she was nicknamed "The Empress of the Pickpockets." She used to sing to people she knew to be well off, and ask them to give her anything they had in their pockets without looking to see the amount. Of all those she asked, one man only demurred, as he had forgotten that he had two hundred-pound notes in his pocket-book. Altogether she raised over £100,000.

In 1915 she went to Honolulu to spend Christmas, and took a beautiful villa. Everything there was normal at that time. The war might have been taking place in another planet. It was full of Americans, so, of course, wine flowed like water. Reville-Terry, one of her oldest friends, had also gone there from San Francisco. He landed on New Year's Eve, and hearing of his arrival late in the evening, Melba sent and got him out of bed in order to attend her New Year party. It was wonderfully well done, as were all her parties. After the guests had departed, she

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and Reville-Terry went down to the beach, and there they sat in the light of the glorious tropical moon with a magnum of champagne between them, while Melba alternately knitted and sang. Reville-Terry was extraordinarily successful in dressing her, and it was not easy, as her figure was inclined to be *prima donna-ish*, and she had not *les attaches fines*, as the French say. She was lavishly hospitable during her stay on the lovely island, and entertained everyone she met. In that way the war showed her character at its very best. Lord William Nevill told me afterwards when she was singing at the opera she would buy a dozen or more tickets every day, and give them to him to give to his wounded soldiers.

And whether knitting, or travelling, or giving war concerts, or entertaining, she lived every minute of her life, enjoyed it all, eating, drinking, dancing, with full-blooded, lusty joy, for her health was perfect and there seemed no reason why she shouldn't live to be a hundred, though why anyone should want to live to be a hundred passes all understanding. The scientist who recently told us that future generations may reasonably expect to live to at least that age has added a new terror to existence. Modern hygiene has, we know, increased the expectation of life. Civilized countries are no longer swept by terrible epidemics such as the Black Death which decimated Europe in 1348, and infant mortality has decreased enormously. But, on the other hand, civilization has its own troubles. Nervous diseases, cancer, influenza, motor and flying accidents manage to put in a lot of useful work in keeping down the population.

The prospect of extreme old age is rather an appalling one. Most of the problems of modern life are due to the fact that the inhabited world is over-populated, and if the old were to keep their energy almost indefinitely, what would become of the young, who already complain that their elders do not give

them a chance? The school age would probably be raised to what is now considered middle age, and we should see advertisements asking for office boys aged thirty to thirty-five, just left school—apply in own handwriting—wages fifteen shillings a week. No one would ever occupy a responsible position until he was at least seventy, and the world would be plagued more than ever with old actors, old singers, and decrepit and *gaga* Cabinet Ministers.

Even that intractable old gentleman, the Pope, would be brought to consider the advisability of birth-control or the population would starve to death, and Members of Parliament would be reduced to eating their own words!

And were science able to give us another thirty or forty years of life and prevent one's strength from "becoming but labour and sorrow" at four score years, I do not see how it could protect us from the fatigue of living, the days when we have "no pleasure therein." It could not give us the joy of youth; its smiling eyes, its strong limbs, and light feet, its freshness and wonder; young love, young appetites. Most people, however physically fit, are a little weary by the time the allotted span approaches. They have ceased to be thrilled by life's excitements. They know pretty well what to expect of it. They see the people and things they loved in youth disappearing and a new world arising in which they have but little part. And they know that

"Rise man a thousand mornings  
Yet down at last he lies."

So the prospect of a few years more in which to go on doing the things they have been doing for so long does not allure them.

All the same, I should rather like to see what the world is like when life has become completely mechanized, and if the arts, especially music and

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painting, manage to get out of the *cul-de-sac* in which they now find themselves. But for that an extra thirty years would not be enough. One would require at least a hundred. And as I am firmly convinced that there is personal survival after death, I shall probably be able to watch the wriggles of humanity far more comfortably from my seat on Abraham's bosom, which is hardly likely to be overcrowded!

Melba loved good looks. They had an irresistible attraction for her, especially when found in combination with youth. She had a particular liking for those very *English* youths who have perfect health, spend all their time playing games, and have little, or no interest in any sort of intellectual pursuit; above all in art or music. I was once at a party with her, when a very good-looking boy of that type, about twenty years old, was brought up and introduced to her. "Oh, Madame Melba," said he, "I'm awfully glad to know you and all that. I don't know one note from another, but my mother, who's keen on that sort of thing, says you sing jolly well!" She was so delighted that she asked him to lunch with her on the next day.

Yes, Melba enjoyed those war years. She was always at heart a woman of the people, even when London society was at her feet, and all this war work in Australia brought her into intimate contact with them, and in the most agreeable way. She was Melba; rich, famous, intensely alive, and she could, metaphorically speaking, unbutton herself and be hail fellow well met, with all and sundry, thus enjoying her enormous prestige doubly.

I hope I shall not be accused of a want of charity if I say that a great many people enjoyed the war. Not, of course, those unfortunates who were waging it, but the stay-at-homes, those who were either making money out of it, or who, having previously been nobodies, found themselves for once exercising a little

brief authority in connection with one or other of the innumerable organizations that war brought into being. Especially was this true with regard to women who love "bossing" something or someone. Musical amateurs, too, whose gifts had not been properly appreciated in their home circle or among their friends discovered unwonted scope for their talents in organizing and taking part in concerts for the wounded, and their vanity was soothed, owing to the infinite kindness and courtesy of the British Tommy.

But everything comes to an end: even a world war, and this vital and indefatigable woman felt she must find another outlet for her energy. Alas! She determined to resume her operatic career.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### MELBA, THE WOMAN

WHAT manner of woman was Melba? Her niche in the hall of fame is, of course, due to the fact that she possessed one of the loveliest voices the gods have ever bestowed on a mortal, but few of us are content to listen to the voice of a great singer; to read the works of a famous author; to revel in the genius of an artist, and to pass on. "I wonder what sort of a man he is," we say; "has his gift set a seal on him which in some way or other keeps him aloof from us ordinary, workaday folk, or is he much the same as the rest of us, except for his capacity to do this one thing supremely well?"

It is a natural curiosity. Human beings are by far the most absorbingly interesting things in the world. We sometimes say, "How dull So-and-so is; he is the very type of the commonplace," but is there such a thing in the world as an absolutely commonplace person? Read the *Comédie Humaine* of Balzac, or some of Arnold Bennett's novels. "Why," we ask, "does he write about this country doctor, this sordid old man, this maid-of-all-work?" We read on, and long before we lay the book aside, we know that these seemingly drab individuals are capable of interesting us as much as any of the legendary heroes of romance.

If, then, the reactions of the most humbly placed human being to his environment can be so deeply

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interesting, how much more so, it seems, must be those of the favoured few whom Providence has placed on pinnacles, far above the level of humanity in general! Perhaps we imagine that knowledge of the private life of a genius, his likes and dislikes, and his code of morality, will help us to appreciate his work more fully. If so, we are mistaken. Genius is nearly always a thing quite outside its possessor, and it often chooses the most unlikely dwelling-place. No more ordinary and apparently commonplace person than Bach ever lived, but he wrote the "St. Matthew Passion," and those deathless fugues, and an intimate friend of Swinburne once told me that the more he saw of him the less able he was to understand how he came to write the "Poems and Ballads."

I am afraid, however, that our curiosity regarding the great ones of the earth is due to no such admirable motive as the one I have suggested. It is rather because they *are* famous; what Americans are given to calling "Prominent People," that we want to know all about them.

Now of all the people of our own generation whose names are household words, we are usually most interested in the people who entertain us. The fashion changes in celebrities as in everything else. Politicians at one time came in for a great deal of notoriety, but of late, political life has so degenerated that one is apt to rank them more or less with highwaymen, and they suffer under the disadvantage of being considerably less exciting to read about! Actors have been succeeded by film stars, and they in their turn have yielded pride of place to flying men. None of them now-a-days remain long on their pedestals. Life moves so much more quickly than it did in the 'eighties. And women—always the greatest hero-worshippers—are so occupied with their cinemas, their bridge clubs, their tennis, and their golf, that

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they have no time left to worship the curate or the famous pianist. A superlatively great singer, however, is always interesting, and it is with one of the greatest of these that we are now concerned.

Melba did not in the least live up to the popular idea of a famous operatic star. Anyone meeting her in private life who did not happen to know who she was, would have been puzzled to place her. That she was a "somebody" was at once apparent. If you occupy an important position in the world, it must have an influence on your personality. Melba was accustomed to being flattered and deferred to; to having people point to her as she passed, and to hearing them say: "Look, there's Melba!" She had the habit of command. All those attentions set their stamp on those who are used to receiving them as a matter of course, and to whom, indeed, they have become second nature.

She was both handsome and distinguished-looking; she had the indefinable manner of a woman who moves habitually in the great world, and yet one knew instantly that she was not of it. There was nothing of the great lady about her; she kept throughout her life a touch of the woman of the people; the honest *bourgeoise*, and she never quite lost her Australian accent. Again, you would never have taken her for an actress—not even on the stage, I fear—and she herself, if you had sat next to her at dinner and not been aware of her identity, would not have helped you, as she possessed the admirable quality of never talking shop.

Now I like people to talk shop if I am having a really serious heart-to-heart talk with them. The majority of mankind are interesting only when they talk of themselves or the subject they understand, but that sort of conversation, and the table talk of the actress who wants to tell you how wonderful she is in such and such a part, or the pianist who can talk

of nothing but the incompetence of the critics who do not appreciate his talents, are not the same thing. By the way, how one can be bored with "shop." The other day at lunch I sat next to a man whose only topic of conversation was the different flies he favoured when fishing. At last, driven to desperation, I told him that I invariably used a blue-bottle. After that he had no further use for me.

Melba had many admirable qualities: although a *born* singer she worked hard to cultivate the gifts Nature had given her. She had the humility of the really great artiste, and was never content until she had mastered her rôles in every detail. Thus, she worked at *Faust* and *Romeo et Juliette* bar by bar with Gounod. She went to Puccini like a little child to study *La Bohème*, and not content with that, she would get Bemberg and Marchesi to coach her in every opera in which she sang from the point of view of the actual singing. It was the same in everything else. Once she was convinced that anyone with whom she had to do knew his job, she would follow his advice implicitly; Worth and Reville-Terry, as I have already remarked, with regard to her clothes, and the best expert she could find when she was decorating a new house. There is an element of greatness in being able to realize one's own limitations. Then she was extremely businesslike—too businesslike, some of her managers were apt to complain!—and she liked everyone else with whom she had to do to be exact. Haddon Chambers said of her once: "Nellie is the most efficient woman I have ever met. Had she taken it into her head to set up a bonnet shop she would soon have been the first milliner in Europe." Not that she had any special talent for bonnets, but she would have surrounded herself with those who had, and used their brains. She made a good many excellent financial deals owing to this capacity for using other people; and in

KASHABANARTI  
ASSOUAN.

Dear Tommy

Many thanks for your letter - Egypt is certainly very interesting & I am loving it. Although we are on an Island, we have a launch, sev'l, & several sailing boats so we set off where we choose. ~~it~~ it is only 5 minutes from the hotel - great harbor of jeansals all very ammunity Remberg is staying there

PART OF A LETTER IN MELBA'S HANDWRITING TO HER FRIEND THOMAS COCHRAN



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the case of anything of a speculative nature, generally contrived that if there was any loss she was not the person to lose.

Her punctuality was the despair of the casual unpunctual society people and operatic singers among whom she moved. She could never understand that an eleven o'clock rehearsal meant any time between eleven and twelve for the principals, and very often arrived at the theatre an hour before it got well started. Percy Eales told me that during all the years he knew her at Covent Garden she never once arrived late, kept the stage waiting, or missed a cue. Only those who have had to deal with opera stars will fully appreciate how rare are the Melbas. Her word, he said, was absolutely to be depended on. She would weigh all the pros and cons of a question, and once she had reached a decision she never went back on it. All the small people at the theatre adored her, as she was kindness and consideration itself to them, and never expected or accepted sacrifices of time and trouble from others that she was not prepared to undergo herself. She never gave herself any airs; it would not have occurred to her to send an understudy to rehearsal as did Patti, and then to walk in and sing in the evening, caring little or nothing for the artistic side of the performance, a piece of vulgar snobbishness of which only a *prima donna* of the old school could be guilty.

With regard to her directness and simplicity, that brilliant young writer, Beverley Nichols, to whom she was devoted, wrote soon after her death: "She was almost brutally straight. That is why she had so many enemies. Once in Australia I told her a lie about a newspaper criticism in order to save her pain. She found it out afterwards. 'Never, never do that again. I want facts.' After that I always gave her facts. She faced them without flinching, however disagreeable they might be. I often heard her say

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'I'm an honest woman,' with a faintly plebeian accent which was extremely attractive. She said it to impresarios, to *maîtres d'hôtels*, to young women, and always with that same suggestion of 'commonness' and a ringing challenge in her voice. She was, in fact, a woman of the people with a supreme natural gift, a wonderful physique, and a character of steel.'

Her passion for facts, combined with her punctual, orderly, businesslike nature, and an almost masculine logic was, I think, the reason why all her life she so much preferred the society of men. I do not think that she had at any time many sincere and intimate women friends. She had little patience with the average woman, especially those vague, casual, but wholly delightful Englishwomen of society with whom she came so much into contact in her great days. And they, on their part, were apt to be rather afraid of her. They found her a little hard, a little too businesslike; what the French call *formidable*. Society likes business when it brings in money, but it doesn't want business to be businesslike!

Melba had no use for people who were not businesslike. Alfred Kalisch told her a story of the famous conductor, Mengelberg, which she loved. He was a well-known collector of works of art, and a very astute connoisseur. One day a friend took him to see the collection of a big London dealer whom he so impressed with his artistic knowledge and his intimacy with the tricks of the trade that when they were leaving the dealer took Mengelberg's friend aside, and said: "*Do tell me where that gentleman's establishment is. He is just the sort of man I like to do business with.*"

Melba was quite at her best in her own home. There showed the Scotch in her. Nothing was too good for her guests. She would put herself to any amount of trouble to amuse them and make them

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comfortable, and she never forgot their likes and dislikes. Her cheerful, exhilarating personality pervaded the house and made things go, and her energy and driving force were astounding.

She was careful of her money, as are most people who have made a great deal by their own talents, but she was not mean, as so many "hangers-on" who tried to get money out of her without success, were fond of saying about her. She helped people all her life; young people, friends, hospitals, Australian institutions, and, what was a far greater sacrifice for a singer of her rank, she frequently gave her services in aid of charities and to help other singers. She could never do enough for those whom she really liked. Opera boxes, flowers, presents of all kinds were showered on them, and she would not listen to an ill-natured word about them. But heaven help those for whom she had no use!

She was generous not only to her friends; she was always ready to come to the aid of any musical talent she thought out of the common, or any artistic enterprise, once she was convinced of its utility, especially if it concerned her native country. Thus, when there was a movement on foot to revive the repertory theatre in Melbourne, she not only sent a cheque for £500, but gave a concert for it, which brought in another £500. She believed in Australia which, as she said, is full of pluck and endurance.

Jealous? Of course she was. What famous singer is not? I once, in New York, when lunching with a certain celebrated American soprano, whose rendering of *Madame Butterfly* was extraordinarily popular, ventured to say how much I admired Destinn in the part. My remark cast a blight over my hostess for the rest of the luncheon. "She never smiled again." Melba frankly acknowledged to the failing. She once said to Bemberg in my presence: "*C'est plus fort que moi.* If any other artiste gets

as much applause as I do in any opera or concert at which I am singing, I simply can't bear it." It is understandable. She was a Queen of Song, and as jealous of her privileges as any other monarch. It is no easy life, that of a great singer; she must be always at her best, and she knows that younger aspirants to fame are ever waiting, expectantly and longingly, for the eagerly desired signs of wear in her voice; of decline in her popularity. Those roars of applause, those armfuls of flowers, those crowds waiting to see her pass to her carriage, mean not only the success of an evening; they are the outward and visible signs of the continued loyalty of her subjects. If for once they fail, fear clutches at her heart with its icy fingers. And so she is merciless to anyone who attempts to shake her throne. Why should she help another to occupy her place so long as she can guard it? *Après moi le déluge!*

And what, after all, do those little jealousies matter? Doubtless they will be put right in heaven, and we shall thrill with joy as we hear Melba murmuring to Ponselle, "My Violetta was as Ella Wheeler Wilcox to Keats, compared with yours." Italian tenors singing "Hallelujah forth in duteous praise," of . . . Ernest Newman! and the Sitwell family quivering with ecstasy as each in turn reads selections from his works to the others. Ah! But that would not be fair. They will have had their heaven on earth!

Melba, in spite of her business talent and her remarkable efficiency, had no illusions as to the equality—from the feminist point of view—superiority, of her sex over the male sex. Her strong common sense made her realize intuitively how utterly fallacious is the theory that woman is man's mental equal. I once, in the days when Votes for Women was the burning question of the day, heard her argue the subject. She said, very truly, that if a woman had a special ability it would always manifest itself, and

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find its outlet. "Woman never has and woman never will be man's equal," she said, and laughed to scorn the idea that women have never been given a chance. Even now some women writers still harp on that string. Virginia Woolf's book, *A Room of One's Own*, for instance.

With regard to literature, music, and painting, woman has had a room of her own for centuries; especially since the Renaissance—and how has she furnished it? She shows up best in literature, and can point with just satisfaction to Jane Austen, the Brontës, Georges Sand, and George Eliot, but where is her Shakespeare, her Dickens, her Balzac, her Anatole France? And in music what has she accomplished? There has never been a woman composer of any importance. Chaminade, Maude Valérie White, and their like, write pretty songs, and that is all. With regard to executants, although there have been and still are, first-class women pianists, violinists, and violoncellists, there has never been a female Liszt, Ysaye, or Casals. The great majority of women never get beyond the front rank of the second rate. A dozen women executants is enough to prevent any orchestra becoming first rate, and even in cooking and dressmaking—woman's sphere, one would imagine—the heads of the profession have always been men. The female Brillat-Savarin has yet to be born.

No, Melba was right in saying that it is the second-rate women who have always been the strongest feminists. The first-rate ones have no need to assert themselves. They soon find their place in the world.

With regard to political life, we find much the same thing, at any rate, up to the present time. Women have the vote, but ninety-nine out of a hundred vote with their menfolk, their fathers and brothers if they are not married, their husbands if they are, and happen to be on speaking terms with them. As for women

in Parliament, we are not yet blest with any who are likely to make political history, though Lady Astor has earned the gratitude of the House by providing it with comic relief. Woman's highly strung nervous system and her physical disabilities would seem to disqualify her for a career in one of the Services, women being, as the French say of them, *foncièrement malhonnête*. They might succeed in the legal profession, but not as judges. "Oh, wise and upright Judge!" To use a popular expression: "I *don't* think." They would be entirely swayed by their intuitions and their prejudices in favour of one or other of the litigants before them. They succeed in the medical profession, their love of children and their sympathy with physical suffering being invaluable in it; but again, I cannot imagine them making surgeons of the first rank.

An instance of Melba's rather crude sense of humour was a practical joke she played Bemberg when his *Elaine* was produced at Covent Garden. As she played Elaine she naturally saw a good deal of him, and he got into the habit of leaving his coat, hat, and anything he happened to have with him, in her dressing-room. Now there is never much room in theatre dressing-rooms, even for the clothes of their occupant, and Melba began to find it a bit of a nuisance. On the second night on which the opera was given she came down after the first act, and, as usual, found the only chair in the room covered with Bemberg's belongings. So she thought she would have what she considered a little bit of fun. She cut his hat almost completely round the brim, covered the inside of it with black grease-paint, cut his umbrella so that it would be nothing but rags when opened, and put two eggs in his overcoat pocket.

At the end of the third act down he rushed for his things, saying that he had to hurry to Lady de Grey's box, as she was waiting with a very important

party of friends to take him back to supper. "Well," she said, "I hope you will enjoy yourself." Lady de Grey told her afterwards that when he arrived his face was like a negro's, his hat fell at his feet when he took it off, leaving the brim in his hands, and that in the carriage he sat on the eggs. And she could not understand his not seeming to be amused at this charming prank.

Such sense of humour as she had was entirely lacking in subtlety. As Beverley Nichols said of her, a man slipping on a piece of orange peel gave her more pleasure than the most sparkling witticism. She liked a *Punch and Judy* show and the rough and tumble of a noisy farce. In the days when men brought their hats into the drawing-room when calling, a friend who was visiting her sat down by mistake on his silk hat, which he had placed on a chair. She found this *contretemps* exquisitely funny.

I once happened to dine alone with her at a restaurant in Paris. She said: "I suppose you would like some fizz?" I had had a slight attack of gouty neuritis, and had been forbidden to take it, so answered: "Well, yes, I'd love some, but don't tell my doctor." "All right," she replied, "mum's the word," and promptly ordered a bottle of *Cordon Rouge*! She could not understand why I laughed, until I explained the joke.

She was a kind and loyal friend to those of whom she was really fond, and would put herself to any amount of trouble and expense for them. She was a great admirer of Landon Ronald's versatile talents, and his success has been very largely due to her, for which he has been grateful, and she would talk in season and out of season about her doctor and friend, Sir Milsom Rees. Here again her jealousy came into play—their allegiance must be wholly hers. She would brook no trafficking with the enemy, especially if the enemy happened to be another singer!

Melba, as I have already said, liked the society of the great, and who, one may ask, who has played a distinguished part in the world of those who "pull the strings" has not liked it? Calverley said—I am quoting from memory: "Read patiently thy Burke. Not he who of old wrote of the sublime and the beautiful, but he who writes to-day of the truly sublime and the truly beautiful: the peer and the peeress!"

But at heart Melba was essentially democratic; she was far too thoroughly a child of her country to be otherwise. D. H. Lawrence tells us that in Australia there is really no class distinction: only a difference of money. Nobody there feels better or higher than anybody else, only *better off*. And there is all the difference in the world between feeling *better* than your fellow-man and merely feeling better off. I have never met an Australian woman capable of the vulgar boot-licking and title worship so often displayed by her socially ambitious American sister. Take, for instance, the way in which Beverley Nichols made Melba's acquaintance. He had been trying in vain for days to see her, as his paper wanted her opinion about the Thompson-Bywaters case. Why, goodness knows, unless it was for the same reason that newspapers print the opinions of film stars on immortality. After telegrams and telephone calls had failed, he took his courage in both hands, and going to the Dover Street Club where she was staying, asked casually for the number of her room and walked upstairs. She was playing the piano and swung round on the stool, saying: "Who on earth are you?" He explained the situation. She looked at him for a moment, then laughed and said: "You're a sticker at any rate. Will you dine with me to-night?" He did so, and only her death ended their friendship.

They made her a D.B.E. in 1918, not, curiously enough, because as a superlatively great singer she

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was an ornament to the country, but because of her war services, so she was now able to read her title clear, if not to mansions in the skies, at any rate to be addressed as *Dame*! I don't think it gratified her much to be called *Dame* Nellie Melba. She had moved too much among those whose titles and orders really counted for something, to set much value on such a petty distinction. There should be a title corresponding to that of a duke for those who, by their genius in art, literature, or music, have caused people to forget for a time the changes and chances of this mortal life by transporting them to a realm of colour, fancy, or sweet sounds.

For the civilizing and regeneration of mankind is not brought about by the brewing of much beer, the piling up of huge fortunes or the spilling of oceans of blood. The writer whose works help us to look away from the purely material side of life, and to love those things which alone have validity—truth, kindness, self-sacrifice, tolerance; the painter who can open our eyes and make us see how much of beauty there is in the world, and the composer or singer whose genius reveals to us another and still more beautiful world; these are the people who should be greatly honoured and rewarded. A famous doctor told me an interesting anecdote concerning Melba and the healing power of music. She was singing one summer evening at a house in Grosvenor Square. In one of the upper rooms in a house near to it, a man was lying so dangerously ill that he was not expected to recover, so ill indeed that he had prayed to die. But miracles sometimes occur, even in twentieth-century London. One hot July evening as he lay weak and almost hopeless, the sound of an exquisite voice came floating through the night into his open window. He said: “If there is such beauty on earth as that voice, let me live.” From that moment he began to mend, and eventually recovered his health completely. Did ever

a political speech or the announcement of a dividend act with such magic?

But in England important titles are conferred only on men who have made a fortune in trade; financiers who ruin their dupes; politicians who ruin their country, and generals who have led to battle, murder, and sudden death a sufficient number of the young and innocent.

My friend, H. E. Wortham, has sent me the following interesting account of Melba's one and only venture into political life :

" Though I had no more than a superficial acquaintance with Dame Nellie Melba, I saw her fairly often in the years following the war when her reign was drawing to an end. The English public has a dog-like fidelity to its favourites, and the name of Melba ten years ago still laid its spell on the people of England. Enough remained of her voice to enable the amateur to say to his young friend: ' Ah, but you should have heard her fifteen years ago, my boy.' And the great public still worshipped without reservation. No theological hair-splitting for them. They believed in Melba, and they backed their belief by paying to go and hear her.

" Melba believed in herself. One day we were having tea in her trophy-strewn sitting-room at the Empress Club, and upon an easel was a recently painted portrait of the diva—a solid, elderly woman looking from the canvas with rather supercilious disdain. Judgment was invited upon it. We—a parson, a young *protégée*, the journalist who should always be last and least in any company—acquitted ourselves of our delicate task as well as we could. But our hostess pooh-poohed our attempted appreciations. She was not interested in the painter's art. She was interested in herself. ' I should never have been Melba if I'd looked like that,' was her comment.

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"The question was how to remain Melba. Her reign had already lasted long. The end could not be far off. Last appearances at Covent Garden, farewell tours, even the silken kindness of critics, pointed to ultimate abdication, and yet the limelight of the post-war world was hard to leave. Things were in the saddle and rode mankind. Life, she declared, had never been so interesting. And women too—what opportunities they had! The name of Lady Astor, in those days the phenomenon of politics, was cast maliciously into the conversation. And when I asked Dame Nellie why she did not unite music and politics, as Farinelli had done, a characteristic nod of the head was my reward. But the two things were incompatible, she said. First she must retire from the concert platform. Then it might well be she would tread the still wider platform of public life.

"Some time after this it happened that Lord Apsley was standing as one of the Conservative candidates for Southampton, previously held by the Liberals, and the idea occurred to one of the intelligences of the *Morning Post*—it wasn't mine, though I may have told Mr. Gwynne that Melba ought to be induced to represent some constituency. The idea occurred to some bright person that in the meantime Dame Nellie might ensure the return of Lord Apsley whose mother, Lady Bathurst, was then the proprietress of the paper. And I was entrusted with the task of getting the *prima donna* to play this new and untried rôle. I should add that the mind which had conceived this scheme had ascertained that Melba was singing at Southampton the night before the poll. All she would have to do, therefore, would be to come to the meeting after her concert was over, and suffer no more fatigue or inconvenience than that caused by the making of a short speech and by reaching home half an hour later than she would otherwise have done.

" I approached the subject gingerly. We talked in general terms. Certainly she was interested in politics, in imperial politics. She had ideas of getting things done. I could conscientiously assure her that she would cut a figure in the House of Commons. Then I put a question—would she speak at a political meeting. The result was discouraging. Her mouth closed with an ominous snap. Suspicion looked out of her eyes. And then she replied with an unparliamentary 'No.' She had never done such a thing. She had her tour to occupy her. It was quite impossible.

" It was easy to confess to disappointment—and not difficult to add that Lord Apsley would also be disappointed, and his mother, too, the Countess Bathurst. And easy to point out how neatly the thing would have worked in with her tour. The sound Australian common sense, which Melba possessed in such large measure, admitted the reasonableness, almost the logic, of my request. And a quarter of an hour later everything was arranged. She would speak—the only condition being that the thing was kept a secret beforehand, because if it were known it might affect the audience at her concert the same evening. And I promised to escort her to the meeting from the Town Hall.

" A few days later the day arrived. I went down to Southampton, and called upon Dame Nellie about four o'clock in the afternoon. She was staying with some friends in the park-like suburb which looked gloomy enough under an autumnal fog. I was shown up to the room, where I found her eating an unappetizing rice pudding—her regular diet, she explained, when she was working. She, too, was rather gloomy, and a little nervous. Rumours had reached her that the fact of her intending to speak was known in the dock quarter. Was I sure everything would be all right?

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"I had no confidence it would be—but as I was interested rather than concerned, I concealed any doubts I felt. And I left her with all the previous arrangements confirmed. When I set out from the hotel at ten o'clock to pick up the great singer, and launch her on what might be another career, the agent's underling showed me with pride how fore-thought had even provided for Dame Nellie's refreshment *en route*. A bottle of champagne and sandwiches were in a basket at the bottom of the car.

"When I got there the concert was still going on. Melba had enjoyed a triumphant evening, and was giving her third or fourth encore—'The Last Rose of Summer,' 'Robin Adair'—a packed hall thrilled to her simple singing of these simple ballads. In the artiste's room there was the usual motley company—various kinds of agents, friends, admirers. As she came back and forth, I kept well out of the way. Here was an excited, a dangerous woman who might easily turn and rend me for having lured her into a disagreeable business. Luckily her wrath fell upon her accompanist for having accompanied 'Home, Sweet Home,' without the music. This was a thing, she declared to the abashed pianist, she never had allowed and never would allow. The vials thus emptied, the last calls taken, I lead her to the waiting car. As she got in her foot knocked against the champagne bottle. 'What's this?' she asked querulously. I explained—rather tactlessly as it appeared. 'I never touch it,' she said.

"The quarter where the dockers live lay in grim murkiness. We drove through mean streets. I felt that the exultation experienced through being the recipient of one's fellow-men's adulation was rapidly ebbing in my companion. We pulled up at an elementary school. No one was there to receive us. Dim lights showed from within. I helped Dame Nellie to alight. A youth, with his cap over his eyes and hands

in pockets, lounged in the doorway. He hardly deigned to move so that we could pass.

"In the passage, however, the noises and the odours of a political meeting reached us. At once Melba was surrounded by stewards. But when it came to leading her to the platform, it seemed that the human mass was wedged too tight for the thing to be physically possible. In a room meant possibly for a hundred children there must have been three times as many brawny and defiant proletarians. They jeered as she appeared at the door; they made jests as she did manage slowly to progress towards the teacher's rostrum. How different this from the atmosphere in the Town Hall! What a fickle thing is popularity!

"But if Melba thought this at the moment, she gave no sign of it. Her Australian blood was up and she meant to see the thing through. The chairman, amidst catcalls and whistles and shrieks, introduced her. Then she rose and began to speak. She was fluent, vigorous; words and gestures equally happy and unstudied. I forget exactly what she said—that shows it was all the better a political speech. Certainly the Empire loomed large in it. But the interesting thing to me was to see how she reacted to her hostile audience. They were determined to howl her down. And she was equally determined to be heard. Once or twice she quieted them, until some of the rowdier spirits, clearly old hands at the game, began shouting again. I believe she would have silenced them all had the chairman, himself a working man, not kept on rising to ask for fair play. He antagonized the meeting as much as Melba cajoled it. Then someone shouted: 'Give us a song, old gal!' 'If I do will you give me your vote?' came the retort, like lightning. Howls and shrieks were the answer. The uproar continued until she went to the little upright piano in the corner of the room.

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Suddenly there was complete and absolute silence. And as she sang 'Home, Sweet Home' there was no other sound throughout the room except the wheezy action of the piano under Melba's fingers. At the end deafening cheers. The room rocked. Melba surely had won.

"But back on the platform, again starting to harangue those cloth-capped voters, pandemonium broke out again. Nothing could quell it. And at last it was evident that when the meeting was officially ended it would be forcibly broken up. Melba, with some difficulty, reached the door. The car which had brought us was not to be found. I helped her into the first I could find. It was Lord Apsley's, and took us to the hotel where the Conservative candidates had their headquarters. On the way, a shaken *prima donna* confessed that she did not think, after all, she would care for politics. Tears were not far below the surface.

"But at the hotel she was triumphantly received. Far from being a failure, as she had thought, her meeting had been a brilliant success. All the toughs from the division, all the rowdies, the breakers-up of meetings, the reddest of the reds, the most determined enemies of free speech had flocked to her meeting. They had wanted to hear her sing. And the fourteen other Conservative meetings had been held in perfect quiet.

"Lord Apsley's agent was confident she had turned the scale. And the Duke of Northumberland happily appeared on the scene at the moment Melba asked how they had known she was going to speak. Twenty-four hours later the result was known. The Conservatives captured both seats. But by then Dame Nellie Melba was in Exeter, and I had fled to Paris."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### MELBA, THE WOMAN (*Continued*)

ONE of Melba's most admirable qualities was her almost invariable cheerfulness. She very seldom indulged in moods and never sulked. Many singers make themselves and everyone else miserable before they have to appear in public. They cannot help it, it is a matter of nerves. Once they are actually on the stage or the platform, they soon regain their self-control. Some, however, continue to suffer acutely until the performance is over. Señor Arbós, the famous Spanish violinist, had to give up his career as a violin virtuoso on that account, and take to conducting and composing. Melba, fortunately for herself, did not know the meaning of nerves; she was always perfectly serene whatever happened. Perhaps a little too serene. The artiste who does not to a certain extent live on his nerves, can never be a great interpretative artiste. Nerves, in this sense, are very different from nervousness. They help to make the musician *live* the music he is rendering, and—especially when he is accomplishing a too familiar task—prevent him from becoming stereotyped.

Melba, like all sensible people, loved her food. At the same time she wanted to keep her figure and found it a little difficult. Once when she and I were dining with Bemberg in Paris, he said to her : "What is the good of making to come a *masseuse* every morning, Nellie, when every evening at dinner *vous retrappez tous ce que vous avez perdu?*" "Quel

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*cochon,"* she answered. "I believe you grudge me every mouthful I eat." Bemberg himself ate very little, but he kept a first-rate *chef*.

She was fond of taking her friends to dine in restaurants. When she was last in London she gave a dinner of twelve at Quaglino's in Bury Street, and was so delighted with the food, "the best in London or anywhere else," she said, that she signed a *menu* for Quaglino, and sang a few bars from *Bohème*, to the great delight of everyone present. Another restaurant that pleased her was the excellent little Quo Vadis in Dean Street, with its amusing *décor* of modernist paintings, and its admirable food. She particularly liked Leoni's *Poulet à la Sicilienne*, and promised him to go often when she returned to London. But she never returned.

In her *Melodies and Memories* she tells some amusing tales of Tamagno, the famous bass. He was paid enormous sums for singing, but he was extremely mean, and being of peasant origin, was not at all restrained from doing what he wanted to do by the conventionalities of society. At a dinner given to some of the Metropolitan opera-singers by the Millionaires' Club in New York she saw him carefully spreading out a table napkin, and whispered to Jean de Reszke, "What on earth is he doing?" They were soon enlightened. He emptied into it a dish of crystallized fruits that was in front of him, added salted almonds, and chocolates, and picking up the bunch of orchids which had been presented to his neighbour, the wife of the Italian Ambassador, said: "*È permesso, Signora? È per mia figlia chi sta ammalata a l'albergo.*" (Will you allow me? It is for my daughter who is ill at the hotel.)

Another time at a luncheon at an Italian restaurant in New York, given by Signor Mancinelli, one of the dishes was *côtelettes de veau à la Milanaise*. At the end of the course some of them were left, and

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Tamagno, turning to his host, said : " What are you going to do with those ? " " Why , " said Mancinelli, very puzzled, " nothing, I suppose . " " Ah ! " said Tamagno, highly delighted, and called to a waiter to bring him a newspaper, in which he carefully wrapped the cutlets. " You see , " he explained, " my little dog, he love *côtelettes de veau* . " The next morning Mancinelli called on him at his hotel at about twelve o'clock, and found him and his daughter having lunch in their private suite. They were eating *côtelettes de veau à la Milanaise* .

Melba always ran her houses on the most liberal scale. When she was coming to England from abroad she would cable to her great friend, Lord William Nevill, and ask him to find her a house and servants, and stock it with everything necessary. She gave him *carte blanche*, and never questioned anything he spent. If she took a particular fancy to any of the servants she would take them back with her to Australia, and she remembered many of them in her will. We have already seen how generous she could be to those of whom she was really fond. Here are two more instances of her generosity. Once when driving with her, in her new and extremely expensive car, her lifelong friend, John Lemmone, said that he wished *he* had a car. She did not answer, but when they arrived home after their drive she turned to him and said : " You had better drive the car back to the garage, John, it's yours . " She did a very kindly and charming action on one of her Australian tours. An elderly *prima donna*, once world famous, had fallen on evil days and been obliged to continue her career long after her voice was gone. She had undertaken a tour in Australia, hoping that her former prestige would ensure success, but it proved such a fiasco that she had to pawn her jewels in order to raise enough money to return to England. Melba heard of it, and redeemed them and sent them back to her.

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She met once in Paris a young Australian artist who was suffering from tuberculosis, and who was convinced that if only he could return to his own country he would be cured. She did not give him money, but she bought two or three of his pictures at a price which enabled him to pay his debts and go home to his family in comfort. Unfortunately, it was too late. He died a few months later.

Like all great singers she hated being exploited, and could be extremely rude to women who asked her to dinner in the hope that she would oblige with a song.

There are always women who hope against hope that a dinner will buy them the services of the most highly paid performers in the world. Sarasate was once asked by one of them if he had brought his violin. He answered: "*Mais non, Madame. Mon violon ne dine pas.*" Paderewski, under the same circumstances made an equally admirable reply. "Won't you try my new piano, Monsieur Paderewski?" said his hostess, leading him to the instrument. "*Oh, Madame. J'ai si peu mangé!*" These stories are perhaps chestnuts, but they will bear repetition. In contrast to these social harpies is the lady who gave a great party during the absence of her husband, and engaged both Melba and Caruso. A friend asked her if he would not grumble at the expense. "Oh, no," she said, "I shall put Melba down as quails!"

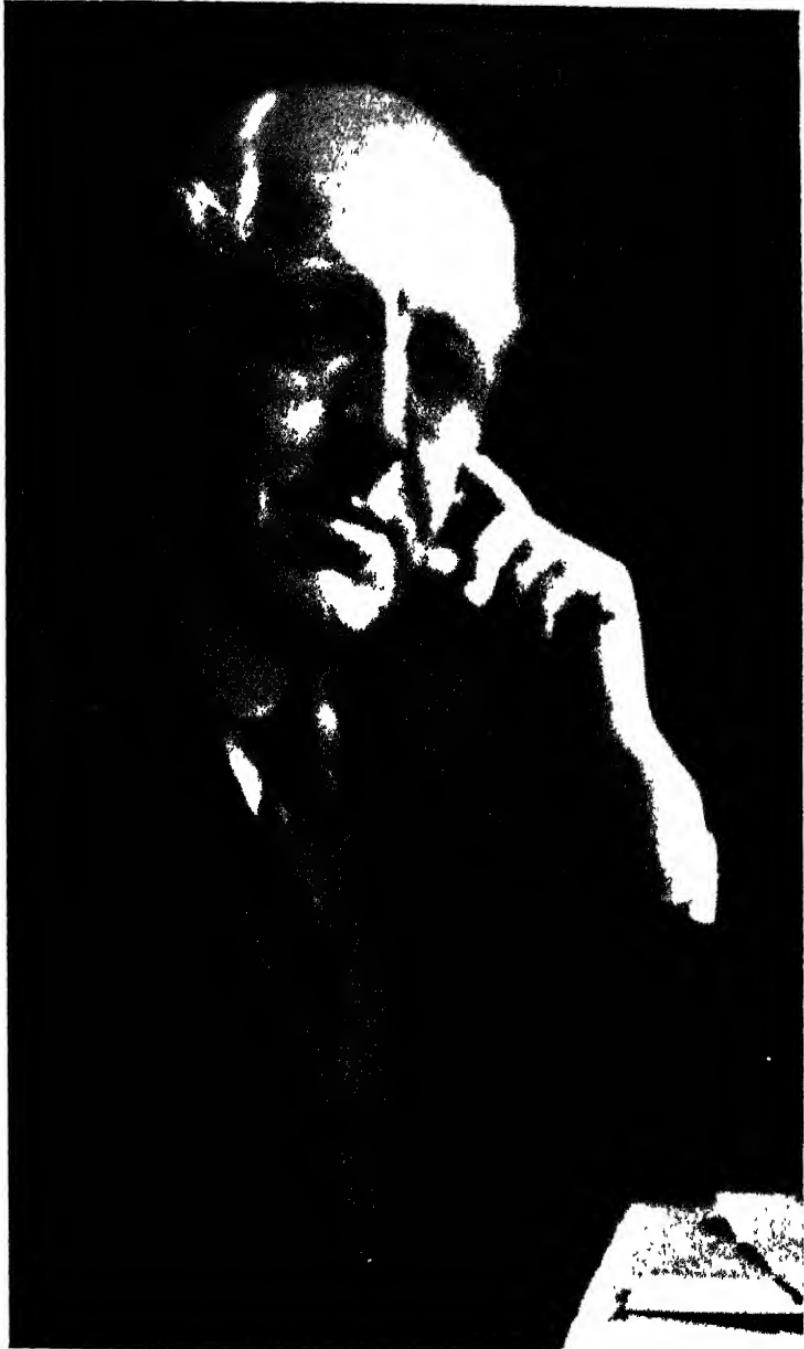
Melba was disconcertingly frank. A friend of mine whose bridge is not up to the Portland Club standard played with her at a country house and made some bad mistakes. She looked at him and said: "What on earth do you play bridge for? You are more dangerous than either of our opponents." But if she sometimes gave offence by her frankness, in the case of those she liked she was always the first to make amends. Once she had had some words with Percy Pitt at Covent Garden, and for some days they didn't

speak to each other. And then one evening she met him on the stage. They stared at each other. Suddenly Melba laughed, and said: "What are you sticking out your stomach for?" "If *you* don't know, who does?" said Percy. "Don't be a fool, let's be friends," she answered, and they supped together.

She hated what she called priggishness. When Clara Butt first came out they both went to a Sunday lunch which Sir Arthur Sullivan gave at a house he had taken on the river. He did them well, and when they left all the men kissed Melba, and would have paid Clara Butt the same compliment, only she strongly objected. "Don't give yourself airs," said Melba; "what's the harm in it?"

I have already commented on the crudeness of her sense of humour, and considering how essentially good-natured she was, it is curious that she should have taken so much pleasure in jokes that involved the discomfiture of someone else. She was intensely amused when Tosti lost his false teeth and refused to see any of his friends. She went to see him and tried to induce him to put in his beautiful new set, but nothing would persuade him to do so. He said: "*Cela me donne la fièvre.*" Tosti himself was a great practical joker, and so they were the best of friends.

Another incident that afforded her immense joy occurred at a party at which she was singing. Her accompanist was an aged musician who had long been as bald as a billiard ball and who wore a lovely flaxen wig. He had been dining, and had not neglected the port, which caused him to see two bars where there had previously been only one, and so to lose his bearings. Melba was wearing a dress with long sleeves trimmed with hanging beads which were fashionable at the time, and as she reached over to show him the place, one of the beads caught in his wig, which clung



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to her arm as she withdrew it. The old gentleman covered his head with both hands, and everyone present rocked with laughter. Melba laughed so that for some moments she could not detach the wig. Finally the matter was adjusted, and they started again.

Unlike a great many famous singers, she never made difficulties about rehearsals. Once in New York a rehearsal was called for *Tristan und Isolde* for the day of the performance. One of the small-part artistes went up to Nordica who was singing Isolde and said: "Why don't you refuse to attend, dear? Nothing on earth would induce me to rehearse Isolde the day I sang it." "Don't worry," said Melba, who was standing near, "*you'll never be asked to do it.*" Zélie de Lussan, who was so intimately associated with her at Covent Garden and at the Metropolitan, told me that although not fussy, she would sometimes imagine she had caught cold. They once toured together in America, and Melba hated the cold weather. She would send for Ellis, the manager, and tell him how much she was suffering and how impossible it would be for her to sing. He duly sympathized, chatted pleasantly, and when he was leaving said: "Well, *au revoir*. Curtain at eight." And she always sang. In spite of the enormous audiences, the tour was a financial failure, partly owing to the exigencies of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The seventy members refused to travel in the ordinary sleepers, and insisted on being provided with the expensive drawing-room cars.

Melba would take immense trouble over her various *protégés*, taking them herself to sing to managers, and arranging appearances for them. On one occasion she arrived at Covent Garden with the American girl, Elizabeth Parkina, who was to sing to Messager, the musical director. There had been a mistake in the hour and no one was there to receive them. Melba did not make a fuss, but Haddon

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Chambers, who had accompanied them, was furious.  
“Where is that blighter Messager?” he cried.  
“Why isn’t he here *to push out the piano and get the curtain up?*” When Melba did lose her temper with the stage hands, she could curse with the best, but she soon got over her tempers. She cursed and tipped!

The organ had been Melba’s first musical love and she continued to love it all her life, and never missed an opportunity of singing to it. She had an amusing experience once; unique for her. She happened to be motoring with Bernard Rolt, and passing through Stoke Poges, they naturally stopped to look at the church immortalized by Gray. The association of the place inspired Melba with the wish to sing, but they found the organ locked. As the Vicarage was near, Rolt went there and asked the Vicar if he might have the key and play for half an hour or so as Madame Melba wanted to sing. “And *who* is Madame Melba?” asked the Vicar. Perhaps like so many people, especially those of the younger generation, he associated her only with *pêches Melba*!

Incredible as this sounds, it is quite true. The clergy as a rule are charming, cultured men, but the ignorance of some of them where music is concerned is amazing. Dr. Henry Lee of Eton and Oxford fame told me the following story of a certain cathedral Dean. There had been a festival service which was attended by a Royal personage, and the organist had been requested to play “God Save the King.” Being of a puckish disposition and rather bored with the proceedings, he played “Rule, Britannia” instead. The next day the Dean sent for him and said: “Dr. ——, I asked you to play ‘God Save the King’ yesterday on the arrival of His Royal Highness, and *I am told* you played ‘Rule, Britannia.’ Will you kindly explain?” The organist apologized, saying: “I am so sorry, Mr. Dean, but the blower insisted on

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blowing ‘Rule, Britannia,’ so I couldn’t help it.” “Indeed,” answered the Dean. “Be good enough to tell him that if such a thing occurs again he will be dismissed!”

Dr. Lee told me another story of clerical ignorance of music, this time about a Canon of Windsor. The old gentleman lived within a few steps of St. George’s Chapel, and the organ disturbed his repose. One day at a time they were adding to the organ he went to the Dean in a state of intense indignation, and said: “As you know, the organ already causes me great annoyance, as I can hear it from my study. Now I see that the new pipe they have just put in is marked F.F.F.F. *Surely that means very loud indeed?*”

Such extreme cases are fortunately few, as when the clergy neither understand nor interest themselves in the music of their churches, the organist hasn’t a chance, however competent he may be. Such men as the Bishop of Chichester, who is a great lover of the English Tudor composers, Canon Fellowes, who is an authority on them, and the Bishop of Oxford, who is himself an excellent musician, are invaluable to the Church.

A somewhat similar incident to that which occurred at Stoke Poges, happened to Melba in a London antique shop. She went in with her old friend, Mr. Cochran, the Australian journalist, and seeing a piece of Chelsea china which took her fancy, said, “I’ll have that,” and bringing out her cheque-book proceeded to write a cheque in payment. The man looked at it dubiously, saying: “I am afraid I cannot take a cheque, Madame, as I do not know you.” “But I am Madame Melba,” she answered. “I am very sorry, but I do not know your name,” answered the shopman. She was furious, and turning to Mr. Cochran said: “Well, one would think that I went about giving ‘dud’ cheques!” “You certainly don’t, you always give *perfectly good notes*,” said he.

When in California, Melba met Charlie Chaplin, and was greatly interested in his personality. She was surprised to find instead of the brilliant clown she expected, a melancholy, world-weary Hamlet. It happened to be the part he had decided to play that day. My friend, Thomas Burke, of *Limehouse Nights* fame, who knows Chaplin very well, told me that he is always acting. Had Melba met him the following day, she might have found a *Charlot* drunk with the joy and beauty of life. Or again, a cynical woman-hater. It is all according to his mood of the moment. On his last visit to England by all accounts he was suffering from a slight attack of *la Folie des grandeurs*, at least if the tale of his refusing to see the Nice journalists, sending back the bearer of *La Légion d'Honneur*, and other reports are true.

Melba loved parties. Partly, I think, because she was intensely hospitable and partly because she hated being alone, and she enjoyed being Melba. There is an amusing story of one she gave on one of her visits to Venice. It was a large party, and very late in the evening they all decided to take gondolas and drift down the Grand Canal. Inspired by the velvety beauty and warmth of the Italian night, Melba began to sing, and of course when the first notes of her exquisite voice rang out, all the gondolas in the neighbourhood drew near, anticipating a unique experience. But alas! Neither she nor her audience had reckoned with the passenger steamers that pass incessantly up and down the canal. "Falling leaf and fading tree," sang Melba. "Lines of . . ."—*toot, toot, toot!* "Lines of white in a sullen . . ."—*toot, toot*—"sea. Shadows falling on . . ."—*toot, toot . . .* and so on. And as the steamboats passed, their backwash made all the gondolas rock. An open-air concert is difficult on the Grand Canal. You must row out to the *Giudecca*.

Such then was Melba. A very human being;

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much like the rest of us, except when she sang. Then indeed she was different. Dryden said, in his "Ode on St. Cecilia's Day":

" Let old Timotheus yield the prize  
Or both divide the crown.  
He raised a mortal to the skies.  
She drew an angel down."

When Melba sang, she was that angel. But when she had finished, she was like the angelic choir-boy after he has taken off his surplice!

I have already stressed the boyish quality of her voice, a quality in which she delighted, as she often said that she thought a really beautiful boy's voice the most exquisite sound in the world. Let me again stress the boyishness of her character; her energy, love of practical jokes, intolerance of weakness in others, and her lusty joy of living. Perhaps she was a little lacking in some of those softer graces that so help to make the wheels of life go round. The small change of social intercourse, kindness and courtesy, pleasant words and smiles. The qualities which make some people loved in spite of their poverty . . . or of their wealth. Those qualities, however, are rarely found in quick, businesslike, matter-of-fact people who enjoy radiant health, and whose energy is tireless. Had she possessed them she would have been worshipped, for combined with her voice they would have rendered her irresistible.

But Dame Nature, when she delves into her store-room to choose our outfit, seldom bothers to match things up, so let us leave it at that, and, as I have already said, be humbly grateful to those whose gifts, be they what they may, can charm us for a moment into forgetfulness of the sordid cares of this anxious being, and cause us to glimpse the happy realms whence those gifts are derived.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### LAST YEARS

“ But Age apace  
Comes at last to all.  
And a lone house filled  
With the cricket’s call.  
And the scampering mouse  
In the hollow wall.”

—WALTER DE LA MARE.

MELBA was growing old. She was fifty-five when Europe went mad in 1914, but so well had she used her voice that only those who had known it at its incomparable best were able to detect any signs of wear. Why was she not content to go out gloriously; to let the end of her singing career coincide with the end of those brilliant seasons at Covent Garden, to which she herself had contributed so much of their glamour? Why, indeed!

There was no need for her to sing, for she, like Patti, was a very rich woman. One can but pity the once famous *prima donna* whom bad investments and expensive husbands have reduced to poverty in her old age, and who needs must revisit the scene of her former triumphs, clinging desperately to the one or two notes left in her voice. And we spare a sigh and a guinea, for *La Cigale qui ayant chanté tout l’été* finds herself *fort dépourvue* when winter comes.

But it is difficult to understand why singers who have made their fortunes and kept them, should expose themselves to the contemptuous indulgence of the public; to the humiliating remarks of the critics:

"the singing of Madame So-and-so was a striking example of how a good vocal method can to some degree compensate for the injuries of time." Or the more downright "Poor old thing! Why on earth doesn't she retire?" I can never forget the spectacle of Patti in her old age, painted, ogling, dreadful, standing on the platform at the Albert Hall, struggling painfully with *Voi che sapete*. Chaliapine, too, ought to have retired years ago. He is still a fine actor—he overacts—but his voice is only a caricature of what it once was. I imagine, however, that in his case financial reasons compel him to go on working. Other great singers who have refused to be wise in time were Albani, Mario, Sims Reeves, and Santley. Few, indeed, have retired at the height of their fame as did Jenny Lind, Jean de Reszke, and Edward Lloyd. It has always been so. Lord Mount-Edgcumbe tells us of a Madame Galli who had been famous for her singing in Handel's oratorios, and who at seventy years of age, having fallen into extreme poverty, was induced to come forward and sing again. "Of course," he says, "her voice was cracked and trembling, but it was easy to see her school was good, and it was pleasing to observe the kindness with which she was received, and to mark the animation and delight with which she seemed to hear again the music in which she had formerly been a distinguished performer."

England is always kind to these old singers, but it is, I think, mistaken kindness. It is far better, both for themselves and for everyone else, that they should realize the fact that their day is over. Caruso once said: "When you hear that an artiste is going to retire, don't you believe it, for as long as he keeps his voice he will sing. Of that you may be sure." He would have been more within the mark had he said: "As long as the public will allow him to sing, he will do so."

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With singers such as Patti and Melba, it is not the love of gain which causes them to cling so tenaciously to the stage, and to make themselves ridiculous with their endless farewell tours and London concerts. Neither in their hearts have they any illusions about their voices. They are too intelligent, and they know singing too well for that. It is rather that for them life holds no compensations for what retirement will oblige them to give up. They have, for the greater part of their lives, lived in the theatre; the footlights, the excitement, and the applause are meat and drink to them. The applause, indeed, ends by becoming almost a physical necessity; it is like a drug with which its addicts cannot dispense. To leave it all for a private life, however comfortable, is unbearable to them. Worst of all, to see other singers taking their place in the affections of the public. That wise old connoisseur of opera, Sir Henry Imbert-Terry, told me that he went with Melba last year to hear Rosa Ponselle in *Traviata*. "What do you think of her?" he asked. She gave him what, in some parts of the country, they still call "an old-fashioned look," and answered: "Have you never heard *me* sing *Ah! fors è lui?*?"

I have always regretted going to hear her after the war. It was in June, 1923, and the opera was *Faust*. It was the saddest evening I ever spent at Covent Garden. Where was the brilliant audience which was wont to frequent the beautiful theatre—the exquisitely dressed, bejewelled women, the smart men? Where was the stir of excitement, the glamour of a Melba night? All vanished, "with yesterday's seven thousand years." In the stalls there were young women holding their hats, and men either not in evening dress, or wearing dinner-jackets, and I could not bear to look at the boxes. *Faust* was played by a third-rate American tenor, or rather, tenorino, named Johnson, and when Melba appeared,

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matronly enough to be Marguerite's mother, I could have wept. The art was still there, but the voice was only the ghost of that silvery wonder of former years. The theatre seemed to me to be full of ghosts. She sang many times after that occasion, but nothing would have induced me to go and hear her again.

Sometimes her former voice came back to her for a few moments, as it will occasionally to an old singer, like the last rays of an Indian summer sun. Beverley Nichols told me of one such occasion. "Her voice," he said, "you tell me that I never heard it at its best. And yet—there was a morning in Venice some five years ago when a miracle happened. It was an exquisite morning of early spring. The canals were veiled in a haze, and the whole city seemed poised like a silver bubble between this world and the next. Melba and I were sitting on the steps of an old *palazzo*. She saw a friend passing in a gondola and hailed him. He was a pianist. Impulsively she suggested that we should all go to her *salon*. She wanted to sing. She sang as I had never heard her sing before. Every trace of age seemed to have left her voice. One felt that there must be some strange harmony between the morning and the song. The mists were lifting from the city, leaving it bright and sparkling; the mists were lifting from her voice, leaving it brilliant and golden. There was, indeed, a quality of light about her voice. She sang *Voi che sapete*. It was like a moonbeam stealing into a darkened room. We were all crying when she had finished. I would give a lot to cry like that again."

She had recaptured her former voice for a brief space on another occasion: that of her "Farewell to the People" at the Old Vic. in 1926. I was not present. I had been too saddened on that evening at Covent Garden in 1923, and feared to go, but Percy Pitt told me afterwards that her voice had once

again almost the morning freshness and beauty of old times. "The pain and the pleasure of it brought tears to my eyes," he said.

Yes, and the aged Melbas should sing only on such occasions. To the generation who knew them in their prime they bring a double measure of disappointment—grief for the passing of the voice which once gave such delight, and regret that the younger generation should gain so false an impression of the singer's art. It is the tragedy of the *personal* message: that of the singer, the actor, and the orator. It passes with the passing of the messenger. For even though now-a-days the gramophone preserves it for us to some extent, it cannot give us the thrill which the actual presence of the artiste gives us. No machine can reproduce warm, living personality.

To Melba, I think the end of her operatic career spelt tragedy. She loved the life and all that it signified. Perhaps there is no more agreeable life than that of a famous *prima donna*. She is always healthy, for without good health no singer can succeed, and the precautions she is obliged to take on account of her voice, the careful dieting, and the avoidance of fatigue, help to preserve that health. She is *feted* and courted by everyone from Royalty downwards; she is loaded with presents and snowed under with flowers. Melba once said: "If I had only the money that has been spent on flowers for me and nothing else, I should be a rich woman." She has the prestige of a queen, not to speak of the financial rewards, which are enormous. Melba never sang for less than three hundred guineas at the opera; or five hundred for a private party. In America she received three thousand dollars for each performance. A Melba has, too, the knowledge, so dear to a woman, that she can make or mar the fortunes of others. Does she sing the songs of a composer, patronize a doctor, a pianist, a dressmaker, frequent a restaurant, or swear

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by a health resort—all of them immediately become the fashion.

One can imagine how hard it must be to give up this life, especially for a woman like Melba, who had few mental resources on which to fall back, for she had never tried to decorate her mind; the one form of interior decoration that never becomes *démodé*. Her interest in literature was limited to light or sensational fiction, and of art she knew nothing. It is curious that she, who had met every great artist in Europe, never took the trouble to have her portrait painted by any one of them, and that although she knew Rodin, who was an enthusiastic admirer of her singing, she did not allow him to immortalize her; a more lasting immortality than that which a voice can confer. Music, as we have seen, was not a passion with her. She could not find happiness in the pursuit and encouragement of it. She loved bridge, which she played in an unsubtle, straightforward way, but bridge is not enough to fill the life of any but the female cabbages, of whom, however, there are quite enough to fill the London Bridge Clubs. All the same, bridge is a wonderful game, and I hope that the next time the Government thinks of erecting a statue to some defunct celebrity, the Kitchen Committee of the House of Commons, or the Director of the Police Museum at Scotland Yard—whichever of the two is responsible for the masterpieces of sculpture that adorn the parks and squares of London—will consider the claim to public recognition of the genius who invented it. How many dull parties does it render bearable, and how many hours of worry and depression does it lighten. The plainest woman seems attractive, and the most boring man brilliant, when she or he, in response to your modest “one no trump,” raises your contract to “three,” and puts down a couple of aces or a long suit that you can establish at once.

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With the coming of age Melba seemed to take less interest in social life. The war was a terrible blow to the set with which she was identified, and which, as I have suggested, worshipped the *prima donna* rather than the woman. Half the men were dead, and practically every woman mourned husband, sons, or brothers. It could not reorganize itself easily; in fact it was never able to do so. The young voices it had loved were silent, the hopes on which it had built, perished. And the smart set which eventually took its place belonged to another generation. So many of its brightest ornaments found themselves rather lonely, and the older men who had not fought and who had never worked, felt strangely out of it among those new disillusioned young people.

Old age at the best is a lonely state; it needs, besides a certain amount of material comfort, all the resources that the intelligence can bring to its aid, in order to render it bearable. And—especially when both mind and body are still vigorous—it often longs passionately for the physical pleasures in which it no longer dares to indulge. And yet I have heard careless youth envy rich old men!

So Melba's thoughts turned ever more and more to that great lonely land whence she had come.

The country in which we have passed our early years must stamp itself indelibly on us, whether it be an old, tired civilization, or a new and undeveloped country such as Australia. The boy brought up in an English cathedral town and pitchforked into the wilds of Canada will come to loathe the shacks, with their corrugated-iron roofs, the endless plains of wheat, and the vast solitudes which surround him; and will be filled with an almost unbearable longing for the gracious old buildings, the mellow countryside, and the friendliness of his birthplace. In like manner the Australian suffers sooner or later from *mal du pays*. *He* longs for the high, open blue sky, the

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wide horizon, the long green rollers of the Pacific with their snow-white foam, and even for the bush. The "ghostly, phantom bush," as Lawrence calls it, covered with tall, pale trees, many of them dead; burnt-up by the creeping, lava-like bush fires. The brooding bush with its iron grey-green foliage; deathly still, wicked, furtive; hugging some ghastly secret, and waiting, ever waiting, to kill and cover up the traces of the luckless stranger who ventures into its trackless wastes.

And even more will he long to get away from the "closed-in" feeling of Europe, its cast-iron traditions, and its class distinctions. Perhaps if he has lived long in Europe, he will soon tire of the careless untidiness of those hideous, often half-derelict suburbs; the soullessness of the handsome new towns; and the want of inner meaning and emptiness of this freedom, for in a land where everybody is equal, what is there left to strive for except a little more money, and the cheap feeling of superiority that material possessions give? And then he will ache with longing to go back to beautiful England, wise, kind, and ordered.  
*"On est toujours bien où on n'est pas!"*

Melba went back, willingly enough, to her native land and her charming property, Coombe Cottage. Coombe Cottage! What memories must have come crowding round her at the very name; memories of that pleasant little colony of ultra-civilized beings round Kingston Hill, seven thousand miles away in mileage; actually as far removed as is the life of another century; almost the distance between the dead and the living.

She was less alone in Australia than in England, for her son and his wife lived there with their little daughter, Pamela, whom she adored. And she loved flowers, and her garden, and the blue mountains which brooded in the distance. On a visit to Australia two or three years ago, she pointed to them and said

to a friend: "I shall die in the shade of those mountains, and before very long."

It was one of those strange premonitions which sometimes come to people, for she hated the idea of death. She was a masterful woman, and she could not down it. She was a materialist, and its mystery terrified her. Beverley Nichols, who saw more of her in those last years than did most of her friends, told me that one day he was driving in Paris with her on their way to a party. She was talking eagerly about the new apartment she had just bought in Paris, and how she was going to arrange it. "After all," she said, "I am still a young woman." Seventy years old and—"still a young woman"! "I shall never forget that moment," said Nichols. "There she sat with diamonds glittering round her throat, and a lovely chinchilla fur round her shoulders, staring proudly ahead." Forty years ago she had come to that same Paris, poor and unknown; now she was rich, famous, and seventy, and "still a young woman." On another occasion when she was very ill with bronchitis, and feared death, she cried: "God can't do this to me. . . . He can't. I have helped people all my life. . . . Can't He help me now?"

When at last the Angel of Death beckoned, he did not deal gently with her. She had contracted a form of acute blood-poisoning, caused by an illness for which she had for a long time been undergoing treatment. It disfigured her badly, and to no one could a lingering illness and disfigurement have been more hateful than to that proud, impatient woman.

And so her last day on earth dawned, that last day which comes to all of us, high and low, rich and poor.

"Golden lads and lassēs must,  
Like chimney-sweepers, come to dust."

It is a disquieting thought that minute by minute the clock is ticking away our lives and bringing us nearer to that day. Some people manage to banish it from their thoughts. I have never been able to do so. A famous politician recently dead, once told me that the thought obsessed him, and that he never rose in the morning nor went to bed at night without saying despairingly, "How long? How long?"

I wonder what thoughts filled Melba's mind when the waters of oblivion began to close her in on every side, and for her, "the still morn went out with sandals grey" for the last time. Did vague visions of the gay society she had so loved, of triumphs at the opera, and of the great personages who had done her homage, float before her tired eyes? Or had exhaustion taken from her the power of thought? Who knows? She could no longer speak. "The silver chord was loosed. . . ."

How can I sum her up? How, indeed, can one ever sum up that strange complex organism of mingled good and evil which is a human being? It is easy enough, after the fashion of many of the Victorian writers, to make one's hero a paragon of all the virtues. Easier still is it, to remember only his failings, and paint a malicious portrait in which black predominates. And, if one tries to steer a middle course, one often gets grey! And Melba was anything but grey. As the quality of her voice resembled that of a boy's, so her character in many ways was a masculine one, and yet she was a very woman; illogical, capricious, and primitive. She could be intensely kind, and, to anyone who stood in her way, equally cruel and ruthless. She could be lavishly generous, and, occasionally in small things, curiously mean—a very feminine quality, this. Even so, I fancy only to people she disliked. One must not forget, however, that in her early life she had been extremely poor, and if the habit of making petty

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economies has been forced upon a woman in youth, she is rarely able to eradicate it entirely. She had abounding vitality herself, and was apt to be impatient with those who could not keep up with her. She was pleasure-loving, and almost Elizabethan in some ways, and yet underneath it all, there was a curious strain of Puritanism. And, as I have said elsewhere, she was honest, truthful, exact, and very loyal to those whose friendship she valued.

She had had everything life has to offer; even that crowning gift, a child. God help the woman who has never known what it is to have the arms of a little loving child round her neck, or to hear a little voice pleading for some childish treasure which to him is untold riches.

The following poem by Alfred Noyes was published in the *London Daily Telegraph* on the day of her funeral.

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Hushed is the golden voice. Its music dies  
Where distance fades away;  
Yet through the silence of her own deep skies  
What wings return to-day?  
  
Unseen, unheard, across that waste of foam,  
The sunset ocean's breast,  
Wings of a thousand memories, throbbing home  
From North, South, East and West.  
  
Dwindling and dim the triumph and the acclaim!  
Fading the rose-crowned years;  
Dying the lights; but not the lovelier fame  
One little township hears.  
  
At Lilydale—all silent the rapt throngs!  
The lost wings beat above.  
They have come home at last, her vanished songs,  
Not music now, but love.

In her will Melba gave directions that she should be buried in a portion of her own land known as Mount Mary, situated near Coombe Cottage, but actually she was buried near her father at Lilydale, according

to her deathbed wish. She had often, in talking to her friends, said that she should like to be laid to rest near a campanile with a *carillon*, where in death she would be near the music she had always loved: the voices of the bells. I can understand the fascination bells had for her as I, too, have the same love for them, but I do not care for *carillons*. The bells I love to hear are those mellow English church bells, pealing from a distance across meadows or over water. They say that Poe loved them; at any rate, he wrote a haunting poem about them. Chopin, too, loved bells, they had the same fascination for him that water had for Debussy. You find bell effects constantly in his music; the *Berceuse*, for instance, and those lovely passages in the Finale of the *Concerto* in E minor, and the *Polonaise* in E $\flat$  major.

Melba left about £200,000, a considerable fortune, but not nearly what it would have amounted to in normal times. She had lost very heavily during the war owing to the depreciation in foreign securities, and the depression of the last two years had affected her severely. In 1914 she was worth more than double that amount. Her will contained an enormous number of legacies. It was a very kind will; no one who had ever served her well, or who had been kind to her, was forgotten. Servants who had been with her years ago, and who had to be traced; poor relations; sick and needy friends; all were remembered. She must have kept a *livre d'or* in which to inscribe deeds of kindness. She left £1,000 to Lady Susan Birch; £1,000 to Lord William Nevill, one of her oldest friends; £100 to Mr. Bernard Rolt; £400 to her nephew, Gerald Patterson, the well-known tennis player, and an annuity of £250 to her lifelong friend, John Lemmone, the flautist, who had been associated with her during her rise to fame, and who always accompanied her on all her tours. I wonder how many times he played the flute part to the Mad

Scene from *Lucia*, and "Lo! Here the Gentle Lark" for her! One of the largest legacies was £8,000 to the Albert Street Conservatoire of Music which she had helped to found and in which she was so greatly interested. She directed that it should be invested to found a Melba scholarship "in the hope that another Melba may arise." In the event of that Conservatoire ceasing to exist, it is to go to the Melbourne Conservatoire in which she had always taken a great interest, to be used for the same purpose. After the payment of all these legacies the remainder of the estate was left to her son, George Armstrong, and his wife during their lifetime, and then to their child or children.

She left all her jewels to her little granddaughter, whom she had always adored. They include many which were presented to her by the various crowned heads of Europe, which are the more interesting, seeing that so many of the countries over whom they reigned have now dispensed with Royalty; among them, Russia, Germany, Austria, Spain, to say nothing of the smaller fry, principalities, grand duchies, and their like. The jewels include one of Queen Victoria's economical gifts, a little brooch of pearls and rubies. A curious souvenir is a solid gold visiting-card with her name, and a tribute from her impresario, which was given her as a souvenir of her first appearance at the Palermo Opera House in 1892.

Little Pamela Armstrong, who eventually inherits all Melba's possessions, is a charming child of twelve. Melba idolized her, and saw to it during her frequent visits to Australia that she was brought up simply, and that the curiosity regarding "Melba's granddaughter" and the wish to exploit her publicly were never gratified. Melba's dearest wish was that she should develop a voice, but alas! there are no signs of it. She has, however, a passion for dancing, and dances delightfully.

## EPILOGUE

“The nightingale that in the branches sang.  
Ah! Whence and whither flown again—?  
Who knows? ”

—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

YES. Who knows? Where indeed have they flown, those exquisite voices which were wont to thrill us? Surely they cannot be stilled for ever? It is hard to believe that the voice of which I have been writing, the voice whose beauty was such that it reawakened the desire to live in a man so sick that he had almost ceased to be numbered among the living, should itself be dead. I, for one, do not believe it. To me the beauty and wonder of this glorious world we live in; the ever-changing pageant of Nature, children, music, pictures, sweet scents, and sweet savours are all unanswerable arguments against the dreary creed of total extinction. Above all, the higher attributes of humanity. For of what use are truth, justice, self-sacrifice, heroism, love, if death ends everything? They lose their validity. You cannot fit them into a mechanical world.

Then again, if love is the guiding principle of the universe, personal immortality seems to follow, for what sort of a God would He be who could create beings with the capacity to glimpse, however dimly, higher kingdoms, higher values, than the kingdoms and values of this world and the desire to attain to them, and then calmly snuff them out? It is unthinkable.

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Melba was not a religious woman in the ordinary sense of the word, but that cry, wrung from her in her extremity, “God can’t do this to me. . . . He can’t!” voiced the innate conviction of the existence of a higher power and of our dependence on it, which comes to life in most of us in moments of dread and weakness; when the poor props to which we have clung, break in our hands and the solid ground fails beneath our feet.

One of Melba’s greatest friends was the novelist, Marion Crawford, whose books were once so popular. He was extremely musical, and possessed a charming and very appealing tenor voice. They often sang duets together, and one day when they had been singing, she asked him to write something in her autograph book. He hesitated before writing, and then said to her: “I wonder if you will like what I have written?” “Let me see,” said Melba. Leaning over his shoulder, she read:

“*Credo in resurrectum mortuorum.*”

And so the picture fades. Melba, the de Reszkes, Caruso, Puccini, King Edward, and his Queen, indeed nearly all the members of that gay society whose doings and manner of living have occupied us for a little while, “are one with Nineveh and Tyre.” Soon—even such is Time—their very memory will have perished.

But, *Dieu merci*, my reader, *we* are still lingering “in the warm precincts of the cheerful day!”

## APPENDIX I

### MELBA ON THE SCIENCE OF SINGING

MUSICAL knowledge continues to spread with rapidity and effect, but I think the greater chances of success thus opened to numbers of followers is very largely—too largely—discounted by the scores of inept executants and professors who, without even the most ordinary qualifications, proclaim themselves teachers and interpreters of an art which demands in its apostles the fitness of very liberal attainments. What should be a learned profession is recklessly overcrowded by ignorant exponents, who are inconceivably accepted even by those who would vehemently resent any semblance of charlatanism in any other serious calling. The unqualified performer is the natural result of the unqualified teacher, and while no test of ability is exacted from the vast body of professors, so long will music suffer through the ignorance of its adherents.

Many amateurs, and especially women, are no doubt attracted to the profession of music by the high, perhaps extravagant, rates of remuneration paid to successful performers and teachers. It is something of an anomaly that a field where the monetary appreciation is so high should be the one where proven fitness is not essential to entry. If we had more competent teachers, we should have more great singers; and I shall never cease to urge the necessity of placing the tuition of singing on a more exclusive basis than that on which it now exists. The acknowledged professors in all the great cities should resort to some

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means to shut out from their ranks the tyros whose research too often does not extend beyond the superficial smattering gleaned in a year or two from questionable authorities.

In all other learned professions—and even in mechanical callings—different technical tests are imposed before a person is accepted as an authority in that profession or calling. In music the insistence on any test is, unhappily, not the rule, but the exception; especially is this the case in English-speaking colonies and communities. Casual observation, backed up by unlimited confidence, too often suffices to win a large measure of public support; the charlatan, by the very essence of his method, having a much more easy course than the cultured specialist, who has made a heavy outlay of time, talent, and money in obtaining qualifying knowledge.

It is my practice to hear as many young singers as possible in the different cities I visit, also in London, the city of my home, and everywhere I am grieved by the injury I see done through ignorant tuition, for in the vast majority of cases I find methods in vogue which are entirely at variance with the health of the delicate vocal cords. We do not accept tuition in architecture, chemistry, or law from any casual dabbler in these professions, but we welcome the gospel of vocalization from those who have not even a perfunctory acquaintance with the science of singing. Students should remember that a good general knowledge of music does not imply a knowledge of voice-production based on scientific principles, and until they come to look for that scientific basis in their teachers, nondescript singers will continue to be crowded on a patient, perhaps culpable, public. Physiological principles are the necessary groundwork of correct vocalization. Through them defects are more surely detected and remedied, and the restoration or development of a maimed or immature

organ definitely achieved. Physiology is absolutely essential to preserve the health of the vocal organs and protect the voice from injurious influences; but in saying this it must be understood that I am dealing with the science, not the soul, of song.

Having said so much about incompetent teachers, I return to the question of inept pupils. Too many girls and youths are encouraged to adopt music as a profession merely because of its gentility as a means of livelihood, or because their voices have contributed to the pleasure of the family circle, where the compliments of a few relations or friends are taken as sufficient warranty of fitness for a professional career. Before young vocal aspirants decide on this difficult undertaking, I strongly recommend the seeking of high and unprejudiced counsel, preferably from a singer who is familiar with the requirements and difficulties of the calling, and who is intimate with the conditions which obtain in the great centres of music. In endeavouring to arrive at a decision, it is well to remember that there are more failures through lack of common sense than through lack of talent. The person who aims at a public career, especially in opera, must have character supported by reason and control, otherwise the progress which a good voice and certain technical knowledge temporarily insure always stops short of great results. I freely acknowledge the value of opportunity, and if opportunity knocks but once at most men's doors, it is ostensibly of primary importance to be prepared for that call. Even that *rara avis*, the born singer, might dissipate heaven-sent gifts for want of opportunity, while the vocalist of highly cultivated talent might never emerge from obscurity without it. Conditions of musical knowledge and physical health being equal, the student of alert mind, who is prepared for her chance, and goes some way to meet it, is the one who is surest of success.

Mental lethargy is fatal to advancement, and no young musician has a right to rely for preferment on the exertions of others. Those who have attained the qualifications of technical equipment essential to success, and who do not achieve it, are generally those who fail to strike out for themselves. Industry as well as knowledge is necessary to the successful novice, and no one is justified in the belief that she or he will sing by inspiration, no matter how prodigal Nature may have been in the bestowal of her gifts. And if diligence is essential for the highest development of the born singer, it must be regarded as of a thousandfold greater importance to the vocalist whose endowments fall short of that inspired creature.

One of the first fields for the employment of the beginner's energy is physiology. No student should be content to proceed without gaining a reasonable knowledge of the anatomy of the throat and the sensitive and complicated physical mechanism that produce the singing voice. For myself, I at one time became so completely absorbed in this study that I could practically neither think nor speak of anything else. An understanding of the delicate functions of voice mechanism is a rational and logical plea for perfection in singing, and was always embodied in the methods of the old Italian masters, whose general accuracy has been reduced to a much surer science by some of their present-day followers. Those who know the structure of the larynx, and the muscular mechanism of the parts called into action by the production of the voice, will find themselves in possession of knowledge essential to correct attack. The application of the air-blast to the vocal cords should be a detail of exact science, not a haphazard circumstance. In a warm general recommendation of the old Italian method, I do not hesitate to condemn the white voice and tremolo so favoured by some Italian singers.

## MELBA ON THE SCIENCE OF SINGING

Great success in singing is impossible to the vocalist who does not thoroughly understand breathing, attack, the use of the registers, the structure and functions of the parts above the voice-box, and the relation of chest expansion to the production of tone. As I have so often said, a beautiful voice is only the basis of vocal progress, in the perfection of which correct breathing is the greatest technical essential. Faulty breathing can even negative the expression of noble thought which a soulful, but incompetent, performer may be struggling to put into his work. It is utterly impossible to demonstrate in song the beauty of either a singer's voice or mind without proper breath control. Tone, expression, resonance, phrasing, are all dependent on respiration, and girls and boys of musical tastes, even when too young to be permitted the free use of their voices, should be fully taught the principles of taking breath.

During the years of childhood and adolescence the science of breathing is a peculiarly appropriate study, for, other conditions apart, correct breathing is highly conducive to good health, and owing to the greater elasticity of the body during the growing years, the chest is then much more readily developed and expanded. As the diaphragm is the chief muscle of inspiration, special care should be devoted to any exercises that promote its strength. Expiration is considerably more difficult of control than inspiration, and consequently calls for the most careful practice.

Exact vibration of the vocal cords can never be secured where the breathing is hurried or faulty, and any conditions likely to produce either should be rigidly avoided, particularly at the time of a singer's first entrance on the stage or concert platform, which even under the happiest circumstances is always a moment of nervousness and doubt. The timid singer will always find her forces strengthened on such

occasions by taking a few very deep breaths on stepping before the public, and by choosing for the opening number—where a choice is possible—music that is free from exacting initial bars.

To my mind, a girl should never enter on the serious routine of voice culture until she is seventeen years of age. Before that time even a moderate share of work is likely to interfere with the proper development of the vocal organs, and perhaps cause certain injury. Only the other day Madame Mathilde Marchesi recalled the fact that the too frequent use of her marvellous voice in youth had prematurely impaired the middle register of Jenny Lind. If one so divinely gifted as she suffered through prodigal use of the voice during her early years, how imperative must be the necessity for care in the case of those whose endowments fall immeasurably below her unique standard!

On the other hand, we have to-day several artistes of world-wide fame, who, because of a reasonable economy of their vocal means in their young days, and their consistent adherence to a correct method, are singing as freshly now as they did twenty years ago, while others, who started with equal or greater natural endowments, have become painfully defective in their artistic work through ignorant use of the vocal organs.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> During the trial of the Horspool *versus* Cumming musical libel suit heard at the Royal Courts of Justice, London, in February, 1908, Dr. Milsom Rees, the famous throat specialist, whose patients include all the greatest contemporary singers of Europe and America, was called as a witness. In reply to a question from the examining counsel as to the unusual retention of an unimpaired singing voice by some of these artistes, Dr. Rees said:

“ It is the result of elasticity in the ligamentous portion of their vocal cords. The most elastic vocal cord to-day is Madame Melba’s. She makes use of the anterior portion of the cord, and that accounts for the lasting quality of her

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A most helpful factor in the study of music, especially for an operatic career, is a knowledge of foreign languages, and as they can always be most successfully acquired in the countries where they are the native tongue, I consider that a sufficient reason for the advocacy of foreign study. Terms of residence in the music centres of Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Russia, and the consequent familiarity with the work and traditions of the great masters of these countries, give the student a certainty, an authority, in her work which cannot be obtained in any other way. The subtleties and complexities of the art more easily possess the mind where music has long been fostered, and where it has become part of the national life, rather than the luxury, or perhaps the affectation, of a class.

All these countries possess great teachers of singing, but I personally consider Madame Mathilde Marchesi, of Paris, the greatest of them all. I repeat my oft-expressed opinion that she is a marvel of scientific method, a most remarkable personality for whose place no city of the world has yet revealed a probable successor. Through the elder Garcia, who developed his method from the tenets of the earlier great Italian masters, Mathilde Marchesi conceived the spirit of her own principle of tuition, which may be roughly indicated in a few words: "Change to the middle notes on F. Begin the head notes on F sharp. Once on the head notes, always practise *pianissimo*."

Madame Lilli Lehmann I hold to be the greatest teacher of German vocal art. Every Italian city boasts of highly qualified masters, and if I were deal-

voice. She knowingly uses head notes instead of chest notes. It is an automatic process. A scale can be sung by putting the full tension on the reeds, or varying from the long reed to the short. . . . In the case of Madame Melba, there is no singer with more resonance and less nasal quality."

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ing with the possibilities of vocal tuition in London, I could name several most admirable teachers. In my own studies I have been most fortunate, for in the operatic rôles with which I am most closely identified I have had the invaluable assistance of the composers themselves—Gounod, Verdi, Delibes, Ambroise Thomas, Leoncavallo, Puccini, Massenet, Saint-Saëns. Holding, as I do, that the singer's mission is to interpret the message of the composer, and not to mutilate or embellish it with extraneous ideas, I naturally consider the opportunity of securing the composer's assistance as a fortunate chance which cannot be too highly appreciated.

From the outset I advise young singers to look after the posing of the voice. They will know better than anybody where the break occurs, and they must see that the teacher does not adopt an extreme course in the endeavour to bridge it over prematurely. Any attempt at unduly precipitating the blending of the registers must result in injury to the voice—indeed, permanent injury is in this way often done during the initial stages of vocal study. Some enthusiasts have described my own voice as of one register.<sup>1</sup> I mention this to draw attention to the result that may be achieved by careful thought and industry, and as an incentive to the many students who discredit the possibility of hiding the natural break.

I am a great believer in the wisdom of fully recognizing every novice's individuality, but the general rule as to the register changes is a safe one for almost every student. There are exceptions, of course, and, as for myself, I carry my chest register up to F and change on F sharp, which is half a tone beyond the usual limit. When I went to Madame

<sup>1</sup> The late Sir Morell Mackenzie, the eminent throat specialist, thought that Melba used the same register throughout the voice.

## MELBA ON THE SCIENCE OF SINGING

Marchesi, she at once recognized this natural peculiarity, and allowed for it in the scheme of my tuition, her discernment giving me a speedy chance to demonstrate that exceptional register changes do not constitute a bar to success. One point of guidance easy of remembrance is that any method that tires a student, that entails a sense of strain, is sure to be wrong.

The most valuable voices often present the most striking, superficial difficulties, and only the most accomplished teachers should be entrusted with the task of their removal. It often happens that even where the voice is properly posed, there still remains a weakness where the registers change, and bad teachers frequently endeavour to produce an enlargement of tone by constant practice of this feeble section of the voice. I am strongly opposed to this policy, and I urge equal exercise of the whole organ as the best method of securing uniformity of tone. But if there should persistently remain a natural blemish, far better to retain the voice with its trifling, inherent weakness, than chance its entire destruction through the enforcement of a tax which Nature indicates as oppressive. During the development of the average voice, scales, solfeggios, and vocalization over its entire range are absolutely essential to its proper growth; but once the period of vocal maturity is reached, I am sure all students who sing in public will be wise to reserve their voices as much as possible in private.

Young aspirants often write to me, and in commenting on the freshness of my voice and the spontaneity of my singing, assume that these conditions are the result of some occult knowledge entirely outside the possibility of their achievement. The secret lies in the fact that I never taxed my voice in the way peculiar to the great majority of inexperienced vocalists. My gospel has been to give the body ample

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exercise and the voice ample rest. This, as I have indicated, is particularly necessary for the students who have already begun to sing in public.

Before even attempting to hum over any music, I am always careful to phrase it on the keyboard and commit it to memory. Young singers too often take a new song or rôle to the piano, and, without any knowledge of it, begin to use and waste the voice in a preliminary that could be equally well accomplished on a mechanical instrument. They chop and hack at their voices, not in any effort at vocal accomplishment, but merely for the purpose for memorizing. It is only when the words and music are firmly engraved on my mind that I use my voice on them, and even then I spare it as much as possible by practising the top notes quite *pianissimo*, except on the rare occasions at rehearsal where the full voice is needed. Practising high notes *forte* is one of the most pernicious customs of vocal study, and as a general rule it may be safely laid down that it invariably minimizes the possibility of those refined, soft effects which are not only a charm, but a necessity, to artistic singing. During practice students should always hold their forces well in reserve, and if they sing the upper register *pianissimo* in private, they will find that the *forte* effects will readily respond when public performances demand it. On the days when I sing in opera or concert I run through a few scales in full voice during the morning, and if I cannot sing top D perfectly I consider myself out of form.<sup>1</sup> Just before going on I try my voice again for a few seconds to warm it.

Apart from the scientific necessity for proper economy of vocal means, I wish to point out that the general muscles of the body become slack in the case of students who spend half the day or more sitting or standing by a piano, wearing out their vocal and

<sup>1</sup> The range of Melba's voice is three octaves, terminating on the high F sharp.

physical resources in a mistaken endeavour at advancement. A beautiful voice, beautifully used, can only continue to come from a healthy body, and their cause would be far better served if they gave much of their wasted time to indulgence in open-air exercise.

An excess of diligence might easily become a hindrance rather than a help, and as robust health is an essential to any large measure of success, anything that impairs the physical vigour should be rigidly avoided. Happily, there is a great deal in a singer's life conducive to bodily strength, the most important being the strong and consistent use of the breathing apparatus, which in itself is almost sufficient to counteract such degenerating influences as late hours, night travelling, concentrated efforts, and the disappointments which, owing to the caprice of the public, the singer, the weather, or from other causes, must be reckoned with in every career. Many students, in their eagerness for musical headway, entirely neglect their physical welfare, and forget that plenty of fresh air, simple, nourishing food, and eight or nine hours' sleep are all necessary to the young singer, whose larynx invariably reflects her bodily condition. Common-sense regard for the individual requirements is almost the only dictum needed in this particular, and the student who has based her studies on physiological principles will have early learned the delicacy of her vocal organs and the course necessary for their protection. I personally greatly favour fruit and vegetables as an important item in the regular *régime*. For breakfast I take only toast and tea; at luncheon a cutlet, or a little chicken, with a light salad, and fruit, but no rich dishes. My chief meal is dinner, which I have rather late—seven-forty-five or eight o'clock—and there is nothing to distinguish it from the same meal in the average household. When I am singing in the evening I do not dine, but have a very light repast consisting of either

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fish, chicken, or sweetbread, with a baked apple and a glass of water at five o'clock, and I always find myself very hungry for supper when I get home from the opera or concert. On the evenings when I am not singing or entertaining, I am always in bed by half-past ten o'clock, sometimes earlier.

My views on the value of individual training are well known, and carry with them a consequent opposition to class tuition. It is impossible for a singing student to give out her best as one of a group directed by a supervision, which must in its very essence partake of the perfunctory. The singers who have succeeded after class-training have been those whose personality and endowments have made them independent of circumstances. Reliance on choir or chorus singing as a helpful factor in the early period of vocal study I hold to be a most unwise course, as an unplaced voice may easily be permanently injured by its free employment in any such body. The following of any trade or profession during the early years of study is a very questionable economy, giving, as it does, to some extraneous interest the vitality which should be the treasure-house of the vocal organs.

Every grade of student may safely follow all phases of tuition where the voice is not called into use in the classes of the admirable colleges and conservatoires now existent in every large community. I think all singers should make a thorough study of the piano, harmony, and counterpoint, which are as important in the expression of music as is grammar to the spoken or written language. The most serious study begins when the student comes before the public, a study which must be endless; but if a young singer is not able to make a promising public *début* after eighteen months' legitimate work, then, in my opinion, she will never make any great success in her profession. Many British and American students are inclined to regard a fairly successful public appear-

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ance as an indication that future research is unnecessary, and so find themselves unable to escape from the chains of mediocrity.

The drama should be carefully cultivated by the vocal novice, and as a collateral aid, both to the science and art of singing, nothing counts for more than intimacy with the work of the great artistes of the day. No opportunity should be missed of hearing and seeing famous singers and actors in their most important rôles. What an inspiration, too, comes to all who have a soul for music when they hear some famous conductor lead a fine body of musicians through a great masterpiece by Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Brahms, or Wagner! No matter what branch of music a student may aim at mastering, every chance of hearing the best in opera, orchestra, recital, or oratorio should be eagerly seized on and seriously considered. Speaking for myself, I am always inspired and helped by every noble interpretation I hear, and into my own succeeding work I seem able to put something I had not so perfectly understood before.

The technique of singing is incalculably helped by everything that improves the intellectual calibre, so the ambitious student should read not only all that is authoritative and informative on music, but become familiar with the beauties of general literature and art, and the wonders of natural science. The power of interpretation is immensely helped by a fine imagination, which comes easiest from a mind illuminated and beautified by wide culture. The singer who can appreciate great pictures, poetry, and statuary, who can reasonably apprehend the glories of the mountains, the forest, and the ocean, can more surely fathom the joys and sorrows of the human heart than the one who is merely well informed on affairs of music.

And now I feel myself drifting from the surer

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ground of science towards the indefinable sphere of art, the elusive qualities of which are beyond the pale of this article. I am convinced that the art of song lies outside the possibility of human generation, and that only those who are born to this subtle heritage can ever reach the topmost heights. It is impossible for any teacher to impart temperament or an unerring musical ear, but even these God-given gifts, and the minor endowments of mind and body, can be developed and enhanced to a remarkable degree by the intelligent and consistent application of those who seek to make themselves and others happier and better through the profession of music.

Neither do the entire powers of the artiste come to anyone as a completed gift; the ideal balance of the mental and physical faculties must be a matter of slow development fostered by manifold influences. This attainment should, therefore, be the aim of everyone who seriously enters on the study of singing, for in its pursuit may be revealed, even where not suspected, that soulful spark which illuminates with a mystic torch the work of the truly great. Perfection of technique is but the stepping-stone to the high plane of repose, where, after many vicissitudes, the student is transformed into the artiste; but then, in that day of self-determining realities, the artiste must still remain the servant, as well as the master, of technique.

## APPENDIX II

### MELBA'S ADVICE ON THE SELECTION OF MUSIC AS A PROFESSION

It having been represented to me that a public expression of my views on the question of young aspirants entering on the study of music in foreign lands might serve in some measure as a corrective to the admitted unwarranted exodus, I gladly join my voice with those who have already endeavoured to remedy an evil the extent of which is little known outside the circle of the victims themselves. Where an English or American student of music has adequate financial means and a reasonable quota of common sense, I would strongly recommend a period of foreign study, for whether the natural musical endowment of such a student be small or great, nothing but benefit can result from the experience. The youth or maiden of circumscribed talents will soon be made to realize the limitations of his or her qualifications, and while this advent of truth may be claimed to have a salutary effect on the mediocrity, it also invariably awakens the greatly gifted to that broader understanding which is the basis of genuine art.

The message, however, which I am now sending to the British and American student is particularly addressed to the inexperienced girls of the Empire and of the great Western Republic, who, without the necessary financial means, and having no friendly circle in the foreign cities to which they journey, too

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often become the victims of their own temerity, and help to add to the prosperity of the ever-increasing circle of unprincipled agents and teachers. Just here I should like to say that few people show greater patience with, and kindness to, the most obscure of their clients than do the established concert and opera agents and teachers of Europe and the United Kingdom; but, unfortunately, it is not by these men and women of repute that the over-anxious and ill-equipped student of music elects to be advised. The essential elements of the position make it otherwise.

To the young American or English girl hungering for musical study in Europe, I can only repeat what I have been already called upon to say to the young people of Australia, where the abundance of admirable voices has led to something like a human stampede to the old country. There, as in America, it has become the custom to send to Italy, France, Germany, or England any girl or youth who exhibits some degree of musical precocity. The circumstances in both countries are analogous. In the majority of cases the American amateur is sent out on a mission of research and conquest, through the ignorant enthusiasm and prejudice of relatives and friends who have no means of knowing the moral and physical humiliation and suffering to which their incompetent advice helps to consign those who are its dupes.

Britain and America have contributed a creditable contingent to the ranks of famous artistes, and may be expected to consistently continue, even improve on, that contribution. Yet it is incidental to these successes that there exists a multitude of failures. In the contemplation of those who have reaped a lavish measure of success, the lamentably and incomparably greater number who sink to obscurity—or worse—are allowed to pass unnoticed. Only those who have succeeded are considered, and emulation of the elect supplies a never-ending and ill-conditioned procession

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of novices in pursuit of ready honours. If there exists a royal road to triumph, it is found almost as rarely as the blossoms of the century plant—too seldom to be of any use as a practical help to the vast majority, most of whom make their search blindfold.

The average English and American student, like those of my own country, arrives in Europe without the measure of talent and the supply of money indispensable to a European career (for even those specially gifted require financial means to tide them comfortably over the necessary term of study and waiting), and in numerous cases the unfortunate aspirant sinks to a deplorable condition of poverty and despair. In the different large foreign cities, I have known, and still know, numerous instances where young Britishers and Americans have arrived full of ardent hopes, fostered by the foolish laudation of careless or ignorant friends, but who, in a condition of penury, are ready to accept relief from any kindly disposed source. A very brief interval too often separates the heydey of their joyous anticipation from the gloom of their shattered dreams.

The lot of these unsuccessful students is peculiarly hard, as they have generally cut themselves adrift from home and friends and old associations, and journeyed great distances, to find the unavoidable goal of failure, through the routine of misery and privation. The students who are not fortunate very naturally try to hide all evidence of their failure, especially in the land of their birth, and in this way hundreds of other aspirants are led to stumble on, under the old illusion as to easy laurels.

Little more than a year ago, Mr. James E. Dunning, the United States Consul at Milan, through the Department of Commerce and Labour at Washington, brought before the American people the calamitous condition of numbers of young Americans who had travelled to Italy in quest of musical fame.

In his moderate and well-considered report, Mr. Dunning dwelt on the hardships to which these young people are constantly reduced through the inherent difficulties of their arduous undertaking—difficulties intensified a thousandfold by the snares spread for them by the designing hangers-on of the profession. What is true of Milan is true in a somewhat similar degree of Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna, and the other great cities, where private and official sources are constantly being appealed to for the assistance of these bankrupt students.

The germ of the trouble is the over-confidence of the aspirant who refuses to be advised, and declines to profit by the wretched experience of others who have tried and failed. Each novice, in the thraldom of inexperience, believes that his or her case will be the exception to the quoted rule, and to those who point out that passable proficiency in amateur efforts may not be capable of the expansion necessary to professional success, an impatient ear is turned by the ambitious though inept student.

Carried away by the outward glamour of a successful artiste's life, they set at naught the counsel of those who would guide them, attribute the sober views of their advisers to over-anxiety, and invariably suggest that it is such interference that has wrecked the career of many an embryo genius. Of the many called, they may be of the few chosen, is their argument; and so they rush on, learning too late the supreme difficulties, if not the hopelessness, of their quest.

Different other causes contribute to this regrettable state of affairs: among them the exaggerated importance which many people, besides the performer, attach to the satisfactory rendering of a little drawing-room music, the facility with which accounts of these and other petty little efforts are circulated as successes in some newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, and the general but decreasing unwillingness of the

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American and English public—as represented by their resident managers—to accept musicians of purely local renown in the most important music rôles. These three causes are in the main responsible for the numbers of disheartened dependents who, year after year, make a most undesirable addition to the American and British colonies in the chief centres of Europe.

The girl or youth—but more especially the girl—whose accomplishments expand to their utmost attractiveness under the genial influence of the home circle, is too often the one who is least fitted for the struggles, the labours, the sacrifices of a professional career, especially when entered on in a foreign land. The very qualities which are her strength in the world of her sympathetic friends become her weakness in the too often blighting sphere of cold, or designing, or indifferent strangers. It is not easy to imagine a sadder lot than that of the young musical aspirants whose once ardent hopes are wrecked in an alien land. All their efforts have been directed towards an illusion, and the training on which they have spent their available time and money, instead of being a help, is an actual hindrance to their advance in any of the rougher walks of life. In this way valuable human energy is wasted, and individuals and families who might have been made happy through its proper direction are reduced to humiliating, even degrading, conditions of dependence. The parents and friends of any average amateur of music should well weigh their words before encouraging any such performer to enter into a professional life, either at home or abroad. The satisfactory rendering of a solo at a family *soirée* or local concert is not sufficient indication of qualifications for a career where brains, courage, tact, industry, resolution, and physical vigour are at least as essential to success as a beautiful voice or exceptional technique.

I would, therefore, advise greater wisdom in the

selection of candidates. More care should be taken not to send abroad students whose talents are never likely to justify the enterprise, and in no case should the novices be allowed to depart without sufficient money to carry them in comfort through an extended term of study and probation.

Then, again, Press opinions on students' efforts at concerts got up for experimental purposes are almost always, and of necessity, misleading. The young singers or players naturally select the two or three numbers in which they are calculated to appear to most advantage; no performer likely to clash with them in any way is given a place on the programme; the hall is packed with interested friends whose enthusiasm creates a false atmosphere, which not unreasonably leads the less experienced critic—who is generally selected for minor events—into writing a notice somewhat more encouraging than his calmer judgment would endorse.

The arranged absence of any superior talent, the ardent applause of prejudiced friends, and the kindly opinion of a critic ready to make the best of what to him is an unimportant occasion, are the points incidental to these entertainments that count towards the summary of their success.

One of these concerts is often allowed to dictate the decision as to a career, yet they are almost always but well-meant efforts at forcing a selection which should never be made.

When the selection has been made, however, and the young aspirant goes abroad, and becomes the centre of one or two similar musical exploits in Paris, London, or Berlin, it is then that special evil is wrought by the misleading reports sent to the homeland by careless but kindly correspondents. The young amateurs who remained at home, and who had no very flattering opinion of those who had been sent abroad, on reading of the latter's success, form

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a hasty opinion as to the ease with which the great musical world is conquered, and straightway enter on the task themselves. The ubiquitous duties of foreign correspondents too often make it incumbent on them to accept second-hand information, and in this manner even the most conscientious among them are sometimes misled. I would urge on all contributors to the Press the wisdom of carefully editing every story of musical success which happens to be outside their own personal knowledge. In this way I believe much could be done to alleviate the conditions to which Mr. Consul Dunning and others have called attention.

As for the American apathy towards the native-born musician whose gifts have not been sponsored by the European public, it reveals a condition which has a parallel at least in all English-speaking communities. I suppose few would dispute that the greatest of American artistes are those who have won recognition in foreign lands, and in that way the preference for such, however much to be regretted, may be said to be based on the selection epitomized in "the survival of the fittest." In the days to come, when music as an inspiration and recreation of the people will have an older pedigree in Great Britain and America, the public of these countries will probably be more ready to abide by their own verdict in the creation of their favourites, and perhaps show some of that ardent preference for the artistes of their own race which is manifested by the peoples of Italy, France, and Germany.

The higher the standard of the British and American music institutions, and the greater the efficiency of the professors engaged therein, the sooner will the element of unreason be minimized in the British and American preference for music artistes of foreign reputation. England and America are already fortunate in the possession of great facilities for the cultivation of music, but there are numerous oppor-

tunities for the extension and higher development of these facilities, many of them provided for in the newly-formed British Musical League and in Madame Nordica's admirable American proposition. In her proposal there is the elemental basis of a great national conservatoire, which would supply local students with additional stimulus, and save many of them from the disappointments and hardships which so often fall to their lot in foreign cities.

I imagine that some of Madame Nordica's critics have taken the reference to Bayreuth too literally. Personally, I see no reason why an American national home for opera, embodying some of the best features of Bayreuth, should not be a matter of accomplishment, and as such become a splendid help to great numbers of students. But my interest lies specially in the phase of her scheme which deals directly with tuition. It is impossible to outline exactly every detail in the preliminary summary of such an undertaking, but the setting up of any centre of musical education formulated on lines that aim at the highest results—always remembering my strong plea for individual, in preference to class, tuition—and where the greatest teachers of Europe might be induced to preside for certain terms, is a step that should appeal largely to the American people. It would give the student, the manager, and the public greater confidence in the home-developed singer or instrumentalist, and in this way alone would do something to correct the unreasonable exodus of music aspirants with which I am specially dealing.

I am also glad to have this opportunity of expressing my interest in Mr. Henry Savage's plan, which has resulted in the establishment of a Paris bureau where American musicians in Europe are able to secure desired information and advice, and I hope some English enthusiast may be induced to follow his example. At this centre Mr. Savage's staff

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keep a record of all young students arriving from America, and provide lists of teachers, schools, agents, managers, coaches, accompanists, translators, diction masters, and places of abode to which they may go assured of fair dealing and friendly reception. As matters have existed up to now, even the students of exceptional talents, on the completion of their musical education, have too often drifted into sad obscurity for want of competent guidance.

Still harder has been the fate of the student whose gifts are but of the average order. Should the bureau be continued on the lines which Mr. Savage's own high personal reputation warrants one in assuming, there can be no doubt but that it will confer incalculable benefit on numbers of worthy young Americans, whose ambition leads them to respond to the uncertain call of European competition.

For all young British and American amateurs having sufficient means to see them in comfort through a term of foreign study, but more especially those possessing exceptional natural gifts, I, of course, strongly urge the advantage of a term of residence and research in the great music centres of the old world. The study of the French, German, and Italian languages, so necessary to the operatic artiste, is always more thoroughly carried out in the countries where they are the native tongue. The chances to study under the most famous masters, and the opportunities to hear the greatest works interpreted by the greatest artistes, are also comparatively easy and numerous in Europe, while in the atmosphere of the famous seats of music there is an incentive which no other condition can so surely supply.

For the student of mediocre talent and little money these advantages, however, are entirely overshadowed by the privations and disappointments which, in their case, are but the preliminary to failure. I repeat, then, that the greatest discretion should be

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exercised in the nomination of students for European study, and I insist that even an unusual voice or admirable technique is not in itself sufficient to warrant an undertaking, the success of which, apart from liberal expenditure, also demands several exceptional qualities of body and mind.

LIST OF OPERAS IN WHICH MELBA  
HAS APPEARED

<i>Rôle</i>	<i>Opera</i>	<i>Composer</i>
Elsa	Lohengrin	Wagner
Elizabeth	Tannhäuser	Wagner
Brünnhilde	Siegfried	Wagner
Violetta	La Traviata	Verdi
Gilda	Rigoletto	Verdi
Aida	Aida	Verdi
Rosina	Barber of Seville	Rossini
Desdemona	Otello	Verdi
Juliet	Romeo and Juliet	Gounod
Marguerite	Faust	Gounod
Mireille		Gounod
Marguerite	Damnation de Faust <sup>1</sup>	Berlioz
Hélène	Hélène	Saint-Saëns
Elaine	Elaine	Bemberg
Mimi	La Bohème	Puccini
Lucia	Lucia di Lammermoor	Donizetti
Ophélie	Hamlet	Ambroise Thomas
Manon	Manon Lescaut	Massenet
Nedda	Pagliacci	Leoncavallo
Micaela	Carmen	Bizet
Margherita de Valois	Les Huguenots	Meyerbeer
Lakmé	Lakmé	Delibes
Luisa	I Rantzau	Mascagni
Semiramide	Semiramide	Rossini
Esmeralda	Esmeralda	Goring Thomas
Infanta	Le Cid	Massenet

<sup>1</sup> Dramatic version.



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